JUNE
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DELL

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

OUTLAW THICKETS

A Complete Novel by Les Savage, Jr.

RIDE WITH THE DEVIL

A Novelette
by Joseph Chadwick

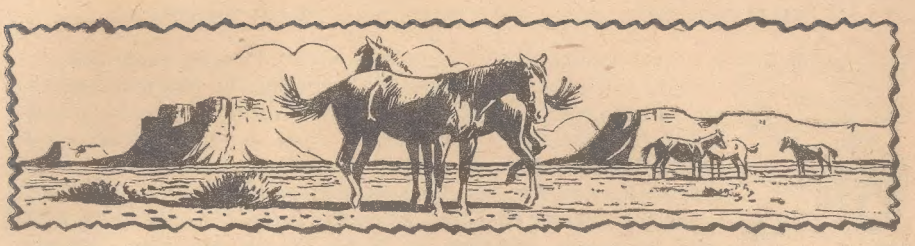
ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

★

JUNE

"Ma'am, this is enough to make me vote the straight Republican ticket!"

Outlaw Thickets, Chap. 16



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Cover picture by Bob Stanley—Frontispiece by Jack Stevens—Black and white illustrations by Earl Sherwan, Erv Schweig, and Bill Terry

Published monthly by

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

George T. Delacorte, Jr., *President* • Helen Meyer, *Vice-President* • Albert P. Delacorte, *Vice-President*

261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Re-entered as second class matter July 2, 1947, at the post office at New York, New York, under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry at the post office at Racine, Wisconsin. Printed in the U.S.A.

Copyright, 1952, by The Hawley Publications, Inc.
Address all subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., or to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Poughkeepsie, New York. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Room 904, 200 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y. Single copy, 25c; yearly subscription (12 issues) $3.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $3.50 in Canada; $4.00 in foreign countries. Editor: Don Ward. Advisory editor: Stephen Slesinger. Designed and produced by Western Printing & Lithographing Co.

Emery Bandine, giant Texan, has suffered deeply from the ravages of the Civil War. Seriously wounded, he has watched his young wife sacrifice her life in a valiant attempt to wring a bare living for them and their children from the soil of their small ranch. With health and strength regained, Bandine has sworn that Rusty and Kit, his two motherless youngsters, shall never know the poverty that took away his beloved Kathy. With half-wild longhorns roaming the Texas brush and new railroads opening the beef-hungry markets of the North, Bandine plunges into the great adventure of maverick-branding and trail-driving, determined to make his fortune in the ruthless, no-quarter struggle for land and cattle. Blind to all else but his fight for material gain, Bandine forgets how to be a real father to Rusty and Kit; forfeits the friendship of his faithful Mexican foreman, Chico, and Chico's father, gnomelike old Santero, carver of saints; does not see the abiding love which beautiful Claire Nadell holds for him. Driven by his passion for wealth, he fights back furiously against the challenge of rustlers, fence-cutters, and carpet-bagging politicos until at last he is master of the range. But he is no longer master of himself—respected and feared by his neighbors, hated and feared by his foes, he has lost the confidence of his old friends, even the love and trust of his own family. Facing showdown, a man pitifully alone, with his self-redemption at stake, Bandine plays his last desperate card.

"Outlaw Thickets" is a sweeping, panoramic novel, teeming with excitement and peopled by memorable Texans—by the author of "Land of the Lawless."

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Outlaw Thickets

CHAPTER ONE

Brush Rider

WHEN EMERY BANDINE heard the crash in the thickets he thought it was the bull he had been following. He turned his running horse toward the sound, shaking out his rope. He saw blurred movement coming through the mesquite toward him and bent forward for his throw. Then he pulled his bronc up with a disgusted curse.

It was Chico Morales, running out of the brush on a scarred-up roan. He pulled the horse to a halt, dripping yellow lather and shaking from a hard run in the June heat.

"Revere told me you was out here somewhere, Emery," Chico panted. "You might as well quit your roundup. You're going to hand all your beef over to the Yankees. Major Nadell is in town with a troop of Union cavalry."

The sweat dripped off Bandine's jaw and drenched his linsey-woolsey shirt. "Not Major Simon Nadell?"

"That's right," Chico said. "Spanish Crossing is under martial law. Every man that was in the Confederate Army has to apply for parole, and his property is to be confiscated."

Like a man getting ready to ride a snaky bronc, Bandine settled himself more deeply into the rawhide-rigged saddle. He was six feet four without his boots on, and their heels added three more inches. His shoulders were uncommonly broad even for such a tall man. He had the lean and catty flanks

of one who had spent the better part of his life on a horse, and his long legs were encased in brush-country leggings of rawhide, shiny with the grease of a thousand meals. The grueling labors of roundup had melted the flesh from him, leaving shadow-stained hollows beneath his prominent cheekbones and in the sockets of his tawny eyes. His voice, when he finally spoke, held a dogged stubbornness.

"I been six months on this gather. I coddled those cattle like babies. I dragged some of 'em in by their noses clear from the Rio Grande. I've lost five years' sleep keeping 'em from stampede. They're for my kids, Chico, and no damyankee is going to take 'em from me now."

Chico's sweaty rigging creaked soddenly as he drew his horse closer, pleading. "Emery, you cannot fight this. If you don't apply for parole you're the same as an escaped criminal. Major Nadell needs meat for his commissary and you are the only one in the country with a big enough gather. Fight him and you'll put your head in a noose."

Bandine shoved his hat back to run a hand savagely through shaggy red hair. "And if I don't fight, my kids will starve. They won't have no more chance than Catherine did."

"Emery, I know how you feel about your wife—"

"If you really did you wouldn't talk like this. If I'd had a hundred dollars I could of saved Catherine's life, Chico. It ain't going to happen again. These cattle are all that stands between my kids and what happened to Catherine. I won't ask you to go on the drive with me. But your dad's house is deep enough in the brush so Nadell will never touch my kids there. Will you keep 'em, while I'm gone?"

Chico pulled his reins in to quiet his fiddling roan. He was typical of the brush-country Mexican, a small and narrow man, burned and dehydrated by the merciless sun of this land till he was as dark and lean as a strip of old rawhide. He wore a brush-scarred jacket and the inevitable rawhide leggings that his people called *chivarras*, pouched at the knees and so worn across the seat they looked chalky. In the shadow of his immense straw sombrero, his eyes held a luminous gleam, as they studied Bandine. Finally, he reined his horse over and put his sinewy hand on Bandine's shoulder.

"My amigo, it is very hard for me to remember when you and I were not riding together. From you I learned the English. I say 'ain't' because you say 'ain't.' I hate Yankees because you hate them. When you went to war, it was my greatest sorrow that they would not take me too. It has been my honor to be called 'uncle' by your children. I could not again face them if I let you go away without me."

"Flowery as only a Mexican could make it," Bandine said. The affectionate grin touched his gaunt face and then fled. "New Orleans is the nearest market for beef, you know."

"Then let us go to New Orleans."

Bandine gripped his arm in silent thanks. Then he picked up his reins and led into the brush toward his shoestring ranch on the Frio River. They rode into chaparral that piled itself against the horizon in bank after bank, black and sullen as tiered thunderclouds. Mesquite was a matted beard on the land, the tops of its tangled foliage billowing away in a restless sea of spine and leaf. The sun sucked the fruity reek of decay from the deep

layer of leaf mold covering the earth and the scent of whitebrush lay thick as syrup in the draws.

It was a jungle of brush that stretched for hundreds of miles in every direction along the southern border of Texas, so impenetrable in many places that it remained unknown to white men. A dry, thorny, inimical jungle that withheld itself from all but those who had spent their lives in it, clawing at a man and stabbing him and fighting him every foot of the way. It fought Bandine as he penetrated the thickets, only deepening the somber mood that had settled into him. It always came like this when something reminded him of his wife, for her death was only six months behind him.

They were too young to marry. He was remembering that. It had been 1861, with Bandine only seventeen and Catherine fifteen. And everybody said they were too young. Her family opposed it bitterly. The parson at Spanish Crossing refused to perform the ceremony.

But they discounted the painfully early maturity that came to a boy raised in such a wild land, and in such deep poverty as Bandine had known. He was already over six feet tall, with a man's weight, and a man's drive. When he and Catherine eloped to San Antonio, the justice of the peace there thought he was twenty-six.

There was a growing market for beef at the time, with outlets at Matagorda Bay and Galveston. Bandine pre-empted three hundred and twenty acres on the Frio, and Chico and his father helped build the adobe house and rode

with Bandine on the roundups in the free range to the west. Bandine had already driven one herd to market when Fort Sumter fell, in April of that year. They were too deep in the brush to feel the effects of the war at once.

Their first child was born in November, a boy, Rusty. Their second was on the way when the Confederate conscript law took Bandine into the army in May of 1862. He served with the Texas Brigade until Brown's Ferry, where a Union soldier Bandine never saw put a Minie ball through his leg. After that there was a lost year in a dozen hospitals through the South, trying to save the leg.

When he finally returned home, he was still weak and suffering with his wound, unable to ride or to work his cattle. Unable to do anything but sit in the sweltering heat of the dooryard and watch Catherine out in the fields, plowing and weeding and picking and shucking and bringing in the meager harvests that kept them from starving to death.

In June they learned that the third child was on the way. By November Doc Simms was telling Bandine that Catherine would have trouble with this one. The hardships of the recent years had taken too deep a toll. There was anemia, and malnutrition, and other complications that made a hospital mandatory. During those next three months Bandine would have sold his soul for enough to send Catherine to San Antonio. But he could get it nowhere. Catherine's family had no money; the brush people had been hit hard by the war, had been living off the land for the past two years. A hundred of them couldn't have raised five dollars in hard cash.

On January the tenth, 1865, Cather-

ine died, giving birth to a baby that never took a breath. . . .

"My friend," Chico said. "We are here."

Bandine looked up in surprise, realizing how long he had been sunk in the black despair of his memories. They had reached the river, lying sullen and brassy under a fading twilight. They turned to follow it north a half mile through dense bottomland brush until they came to the thickets that bordered Bandine's small outfit. It was already growing dark, and the adobe house looked like a patch of buckskin hung against the somber backdrop of brush. Light from its two bottle windows spilled a diffused glow against the dusk, running along the corral poles in three silvery tracks that faded and died in the satiny darkness.

"Think I'd better take a scout around?" Bandine asked softly.

"Perhaps," Chico murmured. "All of Nadell's troops are Northerners and know nothing of the brush. He asked Dan Holichek to help."

"Holichek!" Bandine said bitterly. "That damn copperhead. If he's with the soldiers he won't be coming here. He knows where my corrals are."

"Then we had better hurry," Chico said.

Bandine told him to stay and keep watch, then scouted a circle around the house. Everything seemed undisturbed. His wagon team was cropping peaceably at the fodder in the pen, the milk cow's bell tinkled softly from the brush. He dismounted at the wall of the house and looked through the line of empty bottles that formed the windowglass. It gave him a warped picture of the interior, bringing back the dark thoughts of Catherine again, with its intense poverty. The floor was hard-packed dirt, the beds merely straw-ticked bunks built into the wall, the few blankets tattered and worn and held together with buckskin and linsey-woolsey patches.

The children were playing with a broken doll on the floor and Adah was sewing by the light of a sputtering bayberry candle. She was a gaunt, work-worn woman with stringy hair and knobby hands—Catherine's spinster sister who had come from her parents' home in Austin to tend the children after Catherine's death. Bandine had to stoop through the low door, and Kit jumped to her feet as she saw him, running to him with a wild whoop.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy—"

He caught her up and swung her above his head, kicking and squealing. She was the baby, three years old, chubby and pink and yellow-headed. Rusty was a year older, with a pug nose and a mop of hair the same color as Bandine's. As usual, he hung back, his eyes wide and solemn in a face spattered with freckles. But Bandine strode to him and picked him up and set them each on an arm, with Kit pulling at his hair and pinching his nose and laughing delightedly.

"It's about time," Adah said. "I bet that's the first smile you had today. Anybody see you now, they'd say you was too young to be the father of such big kids."

Bandine's impulsive smile had momentarily robbed his bony face of its hollow-cheeked somberness. But now the humor faded, the stoop returned to his shoulders. He lowered the children to the floor, taking a deep breath.

"Takes time, Adah," he said tiredly. Holding each child by the hand, he walked them over to a sagging bunk, lowering his great frame into it. He

cuffed off his hat, running a sinewy hand through the sweat-drenched mane of bright red hair. It struck him poignantly that this would probably be the last time in three or four months that he would see his kids. He was going to have this minute with them, and the hell with Holichek and all his bluebellies. He took Kit on his knee, winding his fingers through the yellow curls.

"Now," he said. "What happened today?"

Kit giggled. "Moo-cow in a bog, all day long."

Bandine raised questioning eyes to Adah, and she snorted. "Wasn't all day. I went out and pulled her free with a rope."

Bandine turned to Rusty. "What was it today? Yankees or Injuns?"

"Semteem Injums," Rusty announced pompously. "Kilt 'em all with my six-gum."

"Grampa Willoughby," Kit squealed, pounding on Bandine. "Grampa Willoughby—"

The smile came to Bandine's face again, and he nodded sagely. "How about the time Grampa outgrinned Davy Crockett? Davy was a pretty severe colt, and quite a grinner in his day too, you know. Once he grinned the bark right off a tree. It took him all night to do it, which made Grandpa Willoughby pretty disgusted when he heard about it, since he rarely took over an hour for such minor feats of grinning, but it still was something no ordinary grinner could do. It was that same year Grampa ran for Congress against Davy Crockett. They was supposed to speak at Whortleberry Junction, but when Grampa arrived, Davy was already up on the stump, claiming he could cuss dirtier, jump sideways farther, leap in the air and knock his heels together more times before he hit the ground, kill ornerier varmints, and hornswoggle more Yankees than any other candidate running. It was right then that Grandpa Willoughby ups and says, 'That well may be, but just how do you fare when it comes to grinning—?' "

"Emery," Adah said sharply.

Bandine looked up at her. Then he heard it too. His horse had begun snorting and fiddling outside. As he started to rise, still holding Kit, the door was flung open, and Dan Holichek was silhouetted there.

"Hold still, Bandine. I've got a gun on you and there's ten soldiers outside."

Chapter Two

Military Court

SPANISH CROSSING was an adobe town. Its streets were adobe, viscid as glue in the wet season, hard as cement in the summer. Its fences were adobe walls two feet thick, built as protection against Comanche attacks in the earlier days. And its buildings were adobe, four blocks of them standing shoulder to shoulder along Cabildo Street, the main thoroughfare of the town. Many of them were part of the fort that had been built a hundred years ago to protect the Spanish colonists and the gold trains which forded the Frio here on their way between Mexico City and San Antonio. The military chapel in which the soldiers had worshiped still stood at the corner of Fourth and Cabildo, and the old *calaboza* was still

used as a jail, frowning down from the high land west of Martinez Alley.

Claire Nadell could see both these ancient structures, from the window of her sitting-room in the inn, on the corner of Second and Cabildo. She stood in her dressing-gown, doing up the enamel-black plaits of her hair, while her father trimmed his mustache before the Adamesque mirror on the bureau.

"Do you think Holichek will get Bandine?" she asked.

The clip of scissors went on with military precision. "Holichek knows the brush. He's the only one in town I can trust. You've seen how bitterly the rest seem to hate us. I'd hoped it would be different."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully, hands stilled for a moment. It was a bitter homecoming, she thought, to find so many friends turned against you.

For Claire had been born on the Nadell plantation, fifteen miles south of Spanish Crossing. Her father, a West Point graduate, had sustained a wound in the Mexican War that forced him to retire. He had turned to the law, and had finally brought his family to Texas in the early 'fifties. He had opposed secession from the beginning. After Sumter, when it grew dangerous for Unionists, he had been forced to flee north with his family. He had offered his services to the Union and had been given his old rank back. Upon learning that General Granger was to have the military occupation of Texas, Nadell had obtained a transfer to Granger's command, and as soon as the general had learned of his origins, had been assigned to command the Spanish Crossing district. And Claire had returned with him.

She was a tall girl, for seventeen, with a woman's maturity already beginning to fill out her body. There were deep and vivid currents in her that came to life in her dark eyes. Her lips were ripe and full, and the shape of them when she was thoughtful gave her a faintly petulant look. She was thinking of Bandine now.

"If there are so many cattle running the brush, why pick on him?"

Her father answered mildly. "Because my troops aren't cattlemen, and what men are left in town won't turn a hand to help me. Don't feel sorry for Bandine. He's merely taking advantage of a situation. For three years, my dear, almost every able-bodied man in Texas has been away fighting the war. Those cattle increased like rabbits, with not a soul to herd or brand them. I guess there must be a million unbranded steers, anywhere from one to five years old, between here and the Rio Grande. It would be utterly impossible to find out who owns them. You know it's always been the custom that any unbranded steer over a year old belongs to the man who catches it. The whole thing is a mavericker's paradise. Bandine just got the jump on everybody else, that's all."

She half-turned, to look at him, knowing this was a distasteful task to him, despite his rationalization. He was a tall and lean man, a little stooped, with the high brow of the intellectual and eyes that always seemed to gaze serenely into great distances, as if caught up in some dream. One of his dreams was to dispel the bitterness and hatreds of war and bring peace back to his beloved country as soon as possible; it was why he had worked so hard to be sent back in his present capacity. But as usual, Claire thought,

she had been more prepared than he for the bitterness and hatreds they would meet. She had seen each meeting on the street cut into him, cloud his eyes a little more with a baffled hurt. He wanted to see only the goodness in men, and to the end of his life would be wounded and defeated by their badness.

"You shouldn't trust Holichek too far," she said. "I don't think he could have stayed here all that time without playing both ends against the middle."

"Why must you be so suspicious?" he asked. "The man is honest. He's got the clearest eyes of anyone I've ever seen."

There was a discreet knock on the door. Nadell opened it and Claire heard the crisp voice of a lance corporal inform him that Holichek and Sergeant Ayers had been sighted by the sentry. They were bringing in Bandine.

"Have them brought into the inn," the major said. "I'll have to ask you to stay up here during the proceedings, my dear."

As he closed the door behind him, she strained to see out the window. The first riders rounded the elbow turn in the San Antonio Road. Dan Holichek was in front, a man who had been a part of Spanish Crossing as far back as she could remember. His origins lay in the brush, but he did not like to be reminded of it. He was always mixed up in half a dozen obscure deals, cattle speculation, freight contracting, small-time politics. She did not know how he had managed to stay out of the army, but had heard the Secessionists in town accuse him of Union sympathies, and call him copperhead behind his back.

Holichek was dressed in civilian clothes, striped trousers stuffed into jackboots and a linsey-woolsey shirt stretched across his broad chest. His face was boldly framed, something primitive in the blunt prominence of broad brow and cheekbones. Vivid little lights danced through his eyes and they were jet-black as his matted spade beard. Behind him came the linchpin wagon with Emery Bandine driving.

There was no mistaking his towering figure. The strong sunlight glinted on the edges of his hair, beneath the hat brim, and turned it to curly red flames. Beside him sat a woman Claire recognized as Adah Breckenridge, Catherine's sister. Before the war, the Nadells had been distantly acquainted with the Breckenridges, and Catherine had visited the Nadell house several times. Even with this casual an acquaintance, Claire had immediately sensed when Catherine fell in love with Bandine. She seemed to have matured overnight, to have blossomed, and there was a glowing radiance to her. And though Claire had been but a child at the time, she had understood, with a child's intuition, how deep and adult was the love between Catherine and Bandine.

Thus she realized what a terrible blow Catherine's death must have been to Bandine. As he drew nearer, she sought its marks in his face. There was an older look to him. The distinct shadows beneath his high cheekbones gave him a brooding somberness; the humor that had always lurked in the crevices at the tips of his eyes and lips seemed to have faded entirely. It filled Claire with a sense of deep sadness, in that moment before her attention was caught up by the children.

Bandine's baby girl was a sleeping bundle in his lap, wrapped to her chin in his buckskin jacket, so that only her

yellow curls were visible, tumbling all over his greasy buckskin leggings. The boy nodded on the seat between Bandine and Adah. His freckle-spattered face was buried against his father's side, and his great mop of rust-red hair made his head look comically large for his spindly body.

The thought of those two motherless children forced to ride all night in the jolting wagon immediately roused all the budding maternal instincts in Claire, and she knew she could not obey her father's request to stay upstairs.

She went to the clothes closet, throwing off her robe, and got her chambray dress with the bell sleeves and full skirt, twisting and turning to hook the bodice up behind. As she put her shoes on, she heard the clank of spurs and the muttering voices through the open window, and knew the group was passing inside. She rose, tugging her dress straight, and went out. From below, her father's voice echoed hollowly into the hall, asking Holichek how he had done it. Holichek's answer held a smug malice.

"I knew the minute Bandine got wind we was after him he'd want to hide his kids with some brush family first. He expected me to head for his corrals, but I went straight to his house. Caught his Mexican friend out in the thickets, got Bandine without a bobble."

"You didn't have to bring the children," Nadell said.

"I wanted to put a couple of men on guard there, but Bandine said he wouldn't leave his kids in the hands of no damyankees."

By that time, Claire had passed from the hall onto the balcony that looked down into the great chamber which occupied the front half of the lower floor. She remembered its smells so well—the dank reek of ancient adobe, the pungent scent of chile peppers hung from the rafters in glistening red chains, the powdery taint of last night's ashes graying in the huge stone fireplace.

From courtroom habit, Major Nadell had taken a seat behind one of the tables, with the group standing before him. Sergeant Ayers and a lance corporal stood near the front door, their blue uniforms filmed with dust. Bandine was at the table, holding both children in his arms. Adah fumed on one side of him, glaring like a ruffled hen at Major Nadell, while on the other side slouched Chico Morales, his dark face haggard from the all-night ride.

There was something a little gloating about the way Holichek was paring a cigar with his pen knife. He sent Bandine a sly glance and then turned and walked to a chair at a near-by table. He sprawled into it, thrusting his dirty jackboots out before him, and lit his cigar. Major Nadell ran a finger across his mustache, nodded at Sergeant Ayers. The sergeant stepped forward, clearing his throat.

"The charges are failure to report for parole, and secreting property subject to surrender under orders issued by General Gordon Granger at Galveston, July—"

"All right, Sergeant." Nadell waved his hand, settling his clear gray eyes on Bandine. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty. How about some breakfast for my kids?"

Nadell's lips grew stiff. "Bandine, you are up before a military court—"

"He's right, Father," Claire said sharply. "You haven't got any right to make the children suffer."

They all turned quickly to look at her, where she had stopped halfway down the stairs. Holichek lowered his cigar and into his black eyes came a dancing and purely male appreciation of her. All the dogged defiance fled Bandine's face; he stared up at her with a gaping jaw. She knew why he was so surprised. When she had left, she had been only a gangling pigtailed girl of thirteen. She suddenly realized how high the square bodice lifted her breasts, how tightly it sheathed her waist. It angered her that their stares should make her conscious of such things, and she felt color rise to her cheeks.

"I thought I told you to stay upstairs," Nadell said.

"Somebody had to take care of these children," she told him. She walked on down the stairs and moved past the confused sergeant, arms held up for Kit. "Why don't you let me take them to the kitchen while you settle this? There's a bed in there and Poppa Lockwood can fix them some breakfast."

Adah moved protectively in between Bandine and Claire, her face set in peevish anger.

"We can take care of our own, thank you."

"Then why did you let these fools drag them all over Texas in a rattly old wagon when they should have been home in bed?" Claire asked angrily.

"I didn't have nothing to do with it—"

Nadell tapped the table with a spoon. "Ladies—"

"And now you don't even want to give them anything to eat," Claire said.

"Not your Yankee poison."

"Maybe I better settle this," Bandine said. He stepped between them, towering so high Claire had to turn her head up to look into his face. He was not smiling, but there was a suspicion of mischief in the tawny lights running through his eyes. He lowered Rusty into Adah's bony arms. "One for you," he said gravely. Then he gave Kit to Claire. "And one for you." Suddenly, for an instant, his mouth crooked up at one corner. "Now. Does that smooth the feathers?"

For a moment she found herself staring squarely into his eyes. The humor fled his face and something veiled and disturbing hung between them.

"Yes, Emery," she said. Her lips grew full and heavy. "That's fine."

"Very well," Major Nadell said drily. "May we continue with the trial now?"

Claire wheeled away from Bandine and walked to the kitchen door, asking Poppa Lockwood to heat up some milk and to make some cornmeal mush. The paunchy old innkeeper had been watching the proceedings from within the door, and he turned toward the brick fireplace. Rusty was awake now, and Adah set him on his feet, leading him reluctantly after Claire.

"Now, Bandine," Nadell said, "I'll waive your failure to report for parole, if you'll try to work this out with me. You are reported to have the only gather of beef in the vicinity, and in this case I must comply with the order to confiscate. Will you please tell us where the beef is?"

Bandine was wearing immense cartwheel spurs. Their metallic clatter echoed through the high-ceilinged room with the stir of his boots.

"I don't have no beef," he said.

Claire saw the little white ridge appear about her father's compressed lips. She knew how intensely he was trying to preserve his temper.

"Bandine," he said, carefully. "I'm

trying to meet you halfway. The war's over. It won't do us any good to go on fighting each other. There will be more troops coming into San Antonio next week. I've got to set up a commissary for the whole district. My men are on short rations as it is."

"We don't eat so good ourselves," Chico said.

"I wouldn't do this if I could establish my commissary any other way. But the town has done everything in their power to block me. I must have that beef, Bandine."

Claire saw Holichek remove the cigar once more from between his lips, watching Bandine closely. But Bandine stood without speaking, his great shoulders held in that stooped weariness, the morning light coming dimly through the slotlike windows and settling vague shadows into the gaunt hollows and crevices of his face. Claire could see her father struggling with a baffled anger, and knew a great pity for him. Again he was out of his element, brought up against the raw and wilful forces of a man that he couldn't capture and sort out and catalogue in a carefully phrased legal opinion. When he at last spoke, his voice had a brittle sound.

"You refuse to answer?"

Bandine did not speak. Adah made a pleading little sound, beside Claire, but it died in the silence of the room.

Suddenly Major Nadell's chair shrieked against the puncheon floor as he shoved it back, coming sharply to his feet. He stood with both hands flat on the table, the spots of color dyeing his cheeks.

"Very well, Sergeant. Lock them in the jail. And if you haven't decided to talk by sundown, Bandine, I'll put you in irons and send you to Huntsville."

Chapter Three

Runaway

A SOUND like the whisper of dry leaves in a wind struck Bandine as he stepped through the doors of the inn, behind the sergeant. He halted in the deep shade of the adobe arches, surprised to see the crowd that had gathered. It was their sound, their voices, an undulant mutter that ran back and forth down the sun-drenched street and seemed to form a sullen pressure against the adobe buildings. Bandine recognized Revere, the half-breed, and several other friends in the group of Mexican brushpoppers gathered before the Martinez house, directly across the street. Farther down, O'Hara was standing beneath the overhang of his cantina, thumbs tucked officiously into his flowered galluses, surrounded by half a dozen white men too old for the war. Another knot of men stirred restlessly about the blacksmith, in front of the livery.

Behind Bandine, Chico laughed softly. "Looks like all your friends are throwing a holiday, Emery. I wonder what they're up to?"

"They ain't got any right to do this, Emery," O'Hara shouted. "You ain't subject to parole. You been out of the army a year."

"Maybe you want us to do something, amigo," Revere called.

"How about another Bull Run?" cackled one of the old men.

An apprehensive frown touched Sergeant Ayers's sun-reddened face, and he called to the men in the street, "Break it up, now. Go about your business."

The lance corporal crowded against Bandine's back, trying to push him on out. But Bandine refused to budge, looking back over his shoulder at Adah and the kids, still standing by the kitchen door. Chico saw the angry lights kindling through Bandine's tawny eyes, and grasped his arm.

"You got to take it, Emery."

"I can't just leave them, Chico—"

"Adah's there. Everything is all right. There's too many soldiers to fight. You would only make it worse for the kids by trying something—"

"Corporal," broke in Ayers, "form a detail and clear this street."

The corporal pushed by Bandine and began to rattle off names. Half a dozen of the troopers lounging under the arches formed into a line and moved out at his command. The crowd knotted up across the arches gave sullenly, moving out into the street. Seeing the antagonism in their faces gave Bandine a leap of hope. Could that be what was in their minds? If they felt like this, they must already hate the occupation. Maybe he wouldn't even have had to be their friend. Maybe they would do it for anybody, just out of spite.

His hope grew as he saw O'Hara now moving through the crowd, stopping here and there to speak to a man. He said something to Revere and the half-breed caught another man's arm and drifted down toward Third Street. Then O'Hara stepped into the shadowed recess of the Martinez doorway, talking to Antonio, the ancient and weazened Martinez retainer. The old man nodded to the saloonkeeper and disappeared inside.

O'Hara looked across at Bandine, and then headed down toward the livery stable. Chico had seen it too. He met Bandine's eyes momentarily and then pursed his lips and looked skyward in a roguish prayer.

The sergeant and the corporal had been too busy trying to break up the immediate crowd to notice the pattern of movement farther out, and now Ayers waved a hand at Bandine without looking at him. "Let's go."

It was apparently his intent to march down the center of Cabildo and turn east on Fourth, climbing the hill to the jail. But the men from the livery stable and O'Hara's cantina had pressed in closer till the crowd was banked densely against the walls and hitchracks on the west side of the street, calling raucous comments about bluebellies and carpetbaggers. Their threatening presence gradually swelled out into the street, forcing the line of marching troops farther toward the east side and the Martinez property. Flanking the tile-roofed Martinez house on the north side was a large patio, fronted by a six-foot wall that ran for three hundred feet along Cabildo. And set in the wall, almost at its end, was a small garden door.

"Look at those bluebellies sweat," one of the old men called. "You'd think they was marching to their own funeral."

"How about Chancellorsville?" another cried. "Who's Fighting Joe Hooker?"

One of the younger soldiers could not keep himself from answering, and turned to shout, "Better than Pickett. How about Cemetery Ridge?"

"Calhoun," bawled the sergeant, "keep your mouth shut."

But it was all borne along on a rising tide of tension that filled Bandine with a reckless certainty of what O'Hara was planning. The troops moved in a

nervous skirmish line behind Bandine, their faces stiff and set as they sought to ignore the jibes and insults of the crowd, prodding with their rifle butts at anyone who got too near. Bandine saw a man emerge from the inn behind and quarter quickly across the street. It was Holichek, chewing thoughtfully on his cigar. He raked the crowd with a speculative glance as he pulled up beside Bandine.

"I been talking with the Major. He said half the beef would do. You could keep the other half and have your parole."

Bandine spoke with eyes straight ahead. "It always makes me vomit to talk with a copperhead."

A deep flush instantly ran up to the roots of Holichek's black hair, and the rage danced like quicksilver through his eyes for an instant. Then a slow grin parted his lips, and he reached up to run his thumb roughly through his matted spade beard.

"You know nobody can make me mad, Bandine. It's like the Major says. The war's over. The sooner we forget it the better. Now if you're smart, we might work something out. I might find a market for that other half of your beef—"

"I won't make a deal with you or Nadell or anybody."

The flush returned to Holichek's swarthy cheeks, and he turned a disgusted look on Bandine. They were just opposite the little door in the Martinez wall, and a shout from the north end of Cabildo made them both look up that way.

A wagon came into view, careening around the corner of Third and racing down the main street toward the troops. Revere and the other man were rocking back and forth on the seat, shouting wildly.

"It's a runaway," someone in the crowd yelled.

The knots of men gathered along the west side broke before the threat of the oncoming wagon, sweeping across the street and against the troops in a loosely packed throng. For a moment, the soldiers were thrown into a panic by the shouting mob and the wagon descending upon them at a breakneck pace. It was all a whirl of violent sound and movement, soldiers and townsmen mingling together in wild eddies.

Bandine shouted at Chico and lunged for the garden door. A trooper tried to tear himself free of the mob and stop them. Bandine hit him at a run and carried the man up against the wall. Chico came in from behind and tripped the soldier and the man went down.

At the same time, Holichek plunged free of the crowd, quartering in on Bandine and hauling out his gun. Bandine spun around and flung himself against the man, driving a blow at Holichek's stomach. All the air left Holichek in a sick gasp, and he doubled over. Bandine tore the gun from the man and wheeled around to see that the little door was open, with Chico already going through. Bandine leaped across the downed soldier, kicking aside his pawing hand, and followed Chico into the patio. The door was slammed shut and the bolt shot home by Antonio.

"The alley," the old retainer said. "O'Hara, he tell me. Back of the stables—"

As Bandine ran across the flagstoned patio, there was a battering against the door and the wall, as if a segment of the crowd had been thrown against it. Then Holichek's voice rose huskily above the other turbulent sounds.

"Ayers, they got through that door, get your men free, down through the alley—"

As Bandine and Chico scaled the back wall, there was a renewed battering at the door, a different sound, gun butts against solid oak. The two men dropped off the wall into the alley and saw the saloonkeeper holding a pair of nervous horses behind the stables half a block down. As they reached him, they heard running feet down the narrow passage between the Martinez house and the next building. Bandine clapped the saloonkeeper on the back.

"You're a man to ride the river with."

"Save the thanks and get out of here," O'Hara said. "I got to get back in my saloon and look innocent."

The two men swung aboard and spurred their horses across the alley and into the ruins of the old Spanish fort, dodging crumbling walls and heaps of rubble. As O'Hara ducked into the stables, the first trooper appeared in the alley from the slot between the two buildings. He shouted and tried to get his rifle up to fire, but both Chico and Bandine drove their horses into a gaping door of the old barracks, cutting themselves off from his sight before he could shoot.

They clattered down through the gloomy, deserted building, jumping fallen beams. Then they emerged onto the parade ground, ran out through the sagging gate and into the brush. They rode the thickets without seeking a trail, pushing their animals till the sweat dripped off them like rainwater and foamed up around their snouts thick enough to shave with. Finally they halted, trying to hear sounds of pursuit over the roar of the animals' breathing.

"I think we're free," Bandine said at last. "Those soldiers don't know the brush. You go on and get the cattle started toward the coast, Chico. I'm goin' back after my kids."

"Bandine," Chico said, "when it comes to your kids, I think you are crazy."

BANDINE HID IN THE THICKETS outside town until night. Finally dusk came, thickened by the penetrating sweetness of *huisache.* Bandine marked the shadowy patrol of a sentry across the front of the inn, the firefly wink of cigarettes from before the buildings in which the troops were quartered.

If they had kept the youngsters, the logical place for them to be was at the inn. But Holichek had caught him before by using them as bait, and Bandine did not think Nadell would overlook the possibility that he might come back again for them. He took off his immense cartwheel spurs and hung them on his belt so they would not betray him, then worked his way down the alley behind the inn, using spindle fences and outlying corrals for cover. He saw a sentry making his rounds at the rear of the inn; he waited till the man had reached the other end of his march, then quickly scuttled through the brush to the corner of the inn wall.

Crouching here, he pulled the gun he had taken from Holichek. It was

one of the Navy revolvers Colt had brought out during the war, a cap-and-ball, lighter than the earlier .44. Bandine checked the loads from force of habit. The silvery slugs were seated snugly in their chambers.

The crunch of the approaching sentry's feet flattened Bandine against the wall. The man stepped from behind the corner. He caught Bandine's motion from the corner of his eye and started to wheel and cry out. But Bandine's gun caught him across the base of the neck before any sound had left his gaping mouth, and he slumped silently to the bottom of the wall.

Then Bandine moved swiftly around the corner and into the innyard. He caught the awful reek of *perique*, the Louisiana tobacco Poppa Lockwood used in his pipe, and saw the old man having his after-dinner smoke beneath the oak. Lockwood whirled as Bandine came up from behind.

"Emery," he gasped. "You're an Injun."

"Where are the kids, Poppa?"

The old man was on his feet now. "Don't be a fool. They actually didn't expect you to come back, but they ain't taking any chances. They've got guards all around, Emery. You'll never make it—"

"Where are the kids?"

The man made an exasperated noise. "Up in the Major's room. That daughter of his took a shine to the tykes. Got Adah and them right with her. The Major's down in the dining-room having his nightcap—"

Bandine squeezed his arm. "Go into the hall where I can hear you from upstairs, and if the Major starts to come up, you get a real bad coughing fit."

Before the man could answer, Bandine wheeled toward a bench, carrying it over to the wall, climbing up on it to gain the top. He worked his way along the wall to the kitchen roof, bellied up across the broken tiles till he was level with the second-story balcony that ran across the rear of the building. Once on this, he moved silently down to the lighted windows. Reaching the first one, he had his view into the room.

It was meagerly furnished, with a great tester bed of hand-carved oak brought north generations ago by some Spaniard, a couple of rickety cane chairs, a cracked mirror over a side table that bore a stained china crock for water. The sputtering light of hog-fat candles fell sallowly across Claire, seated like a child on the bed's huge feather tick. Kit was cuddled sleepily in her lap, and Rusty sat beside her, looking up into her face with his solemn eyes. Adah sat stiffly in one of the cane chairs by the wall, lips pursed in sour disapproval, her sewing held motionless in red-knuckled hands.

Claire was telling the children some kind of bedtime story, her voice coming clearly through the half-opened window. "And this bear, he was the biggest, growlingest, furriest bear in all the world, and he had all the fuzzy little rabbits afraid of him—"

"Tell us Grampa Willoughby," Rusty said.

"Maybe I better do that, ma'am," Bandine said, pushing the window open and stepping over the low sill.

Claire stiffened, her face blank with shock. Adah stood up, dropping her sewing. Kit turned in Claire's lap, then almost fell on her head, scrambling off the bed and running to Bandine.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy—"

Bandine lunged for her in a long stride, scooping her up with one hand

over her mouth. He held her against his chest and took his hand off and she buried her face in his greasy buckskins with a happy gurgle. Rusty had turned to stare at Bandine, hanging back as always, seeming to ponder this new turn of events as solemnly as a judge weighing the facts of his case. Over the tousled mop of his rust-colored hair, Claire was looking at Bandine with wide eyes. Finally she said:

"You were a fool to come back. A score of troops in the plaza, my father and his officers right downstairs."

"You wouldn't call him, ma'am."

"What if I did?"

He took the revolver from his belt. Claire stared down the muzzle of the gun with anger darkening her eyes.

"You wouldn't dare," she breathed.

"I'd do almost anything for my kids, ma'am."

After that, for a moment, it was only the sound of their breathing in the room. Then Bandine hunkered down, still holding Kit against his chest, saying softly to Rusty:

"How about topping that bronc?"

The boy considered this judiciously for a moment. Then he crawled to the edge of the bed and dropped off and came to Bandine. He climbed up on his father's knee, squirmed atop a shoulder, finally got his legs astraddle Bandine's broad neck.

As Bandine rose, still holding Kit to his chest, Claire glanced angrily toward the door. Bandine stiffened, thinking she meant to call out. But she settled back into the feather tick, turning toward him again. Her lips pressed together, growing full and heavy. A smoky softness came into her eyes.

"Very well, Emery," she said. "Who could turn you in, with those two in your arms?"

Chapter Four

The Defeated

THAT year—1865—was a bitter one for Texas. The first thin trickle of the defeated gray armies was starting to return. They came back to cotton rotting in the fields, without any market, and no place to sell the hordes of unbranded cattle running the brush. They came back to renewed strife with the Unionists, and the carpetbaggers and the scalawags descending upon the South with their radical aims of reconstruction.

And it was a bitter year for Claire Nadell.

She had thought she was prepared for the antagonism she would meet. But it was an insidious thing that crumbled a person's defenses. It was like a knife turned in the wound to walk down the street and see people crossing to the other side to avoid her, to see a former friend's face turn wooden with hostility at her approach, to step into a store and hear the talk and movement cease suddenly, leaving a hushed wall of silence.

The Bandine incident only seemed to have intensified the hostility. During those first days after Bandine's escape, the inn had teemed with people. It seemed Major Nadell had arraigned everybody in town in an effort to find out where Bandine might be, and to discover those responsible for his escape. But the men on the runaway wagon claimed that a dog had bitten their horses. Antonio had only opened the garden door to see what was going on, and Bandine had plunged through and had forced him at gun point to

close and lock the door. The hostler said it must have been his careless stableboy who had hitched the horses out back. It left the Major baffled and helpless, knowing it had been a conspiracy, yet unable to gain any proof against those involved.

To add to Nadell's troubles, the emancipated Negroes had begun to leave the ranches and plantations, converging on the town in droves. The belief that each Negro was to be given forty acres and a mule, the even wilder story that the slaves were to get all the lands of their former masters, the childish expectancy that the Union soldiers were there to feed and clothe them—these and dozens of other rumors filled the miserable camps the Negroes set up on the outskirts of town. The streets of the town and all its approaches were lined by begging blacks, and there was a constant threat of trouble between them and the more radical Secessionists.

In the face of all this, the fate of the Bandine children should have seemed a small thing. But Claire found that she could not forget them. In the short time she had been with them that afternoon, they had completely captured her. She knew Bandine hadn't taken them to New Orleans; he must have left them with some family in the thickets. Even during normal times the brush people lived a harsh and barren existence; the poverty they must be suffering now frightened Claire.

She pleaded with Adah to tell her where Bandine might have taken the children. But the woman was like a rock. Nadell released her from custody the day after Bandine's escape and detailed a pair of men to watch her, with the idea that she might lead them to Bandine. But one night she gave them the slip and disappeared.

Claire had only one hope left. She remembered the red sweater Adah had been knitting for Kit. There had not been enough yarn left to finish it. The woman had not been near the store after her release, but she would eventually need more yarn, and the only place she could get it was Spanish Crossing.

So Claire went to Leander. He was the son of the Nadells' former Negro cook, Pearl, and had been lucky enough to get a job as handy man around the general store on Cabildo Street. Claire asked him to keep his eyes open and report to her anybody out of the brush who bought a ball of red yarn.

The days passed slowly, unbearably hot through July, prostrating a country already on its knees. On the tenth of July, the Major got a letter from his son, Webb, saying he was coming home from West Point for the summer. On the day Webb was to arrive, a quarrel arose in the brush between a returned Unionist and a Secessionist, and the Major had to go out to arbitrate, leaving Claire to meet her brother alone.

The stage was due at four, and at ten minutes to, Claire started to the station. As she approached Ewing Samuel's general store halfway between First and Second, a pair of sunbonneted women stepped from the shadowy doorway, market baskets on their arms. One was Ruby Samuels, who had been a close friend to Claire's mother before her death. Claire saw Ruby turn, saw Ruby's lips part, as if she meant to speak a greeting. But the other woman grasped her arm, saying something in a spiteful voice. Guilt ran like a spasm through Ruby's face; her head dipped till the polka-dotted bonnet hid her eyes, and she turned with the other

woman back into the door. It sent a thin nausea through Claire, and she had to force herself to go on, head held high.

Beyond Fourth, Cabildo made an elbow turn and ran down to the stone bridge that had taken the place of the original ford across the river. At the turn stood the stage station, a long building with slotted windows, its crumbling adobe walls still bearing the pockmarks of Comanche arrows. The keeper was lounging on the bench by the door. When he saw Claire coming, he rose, chewing at the straw between his lips with a studied insolence, and disappeared inside.

Flushing with impotent anger, Claire took the bench by herself, brushing futilely at the horde of flies that immediately descended upon her. She had not seen Webb since he had started West Point, a year ago, but the joy of his return seemed hopelessly marred.

The stage, as usual, was late. But finally the scarred old Concord clattered across the bridge and came up the last stretch of road with the dust boiling from beneath its wheels like yellow smoke. At the rear window, Claire saw her brother's face, with the narrow aristocracy of her mother in its acquiline nose, its arched brows, the almost feminine sculpturing of its lips.

He swung open the door, gallantly helping another woman down, then swung to the ground himself. He was in civilians, a bottle-green frock coat and gray moleskin trousers, a slim and elegant figure, with a dashing air about every movement. Laughingly he took Claire in his arms and hugged her till she gasped for breath. Then he held her at arm's length.

"My little sister has become a beautiful woman overnight."

She was still laughing with the gaiety and release of the greeting. Webb wrinkled his nose at the ripe stableyard smell of the sweating horses and took Claire's arm to pull her away.

"I'm so glad you've come," she told him. "It's been awfully hard, especially for Dad. We need somebody to make us laugh. How long will it be, Webb?"

"A few weeks, I guess. They couldn't run the Academy much longer than that without me, you know."

"Webb, look at me," she said. His smile got stiff and a little muscle twitched in his face. She put her hands on his arms. "You were having trouble with your grades last semester. You haven't been dismissed?"

"Dismissed?" There was a definite effort to the jaunty tone he created. "How can you talk that way? The high man in his class, the future general from Spanish Crossing."

"You've been booted out. Don't try and hide it from me. I know you too well."

His pretense faded like a receding tide before her knowledge of him, and he caught her hands in his, suddenly pleading. "Sis, help me, I know the Major will blow the roof off—"

"What happened?"

"Oh—" He shook his head from side to side deprecatingly. "A little gambling, a little drinking—"

"And a woman?"

"I guess so."

"Webb, why does it always have to be a woman? How could you let Dad down so badly? You know it was his dream, how he sacrificed so much to get you there."

"I couldn't help it, Sis. I hate to tell the Major; I know how much it meant to him. Help me. He'll take it better from you."

"I'll do no such thing. You made this mess yourself, you tell him."

But when she saw the joy in her father's face, greeting his son, her resolve began to break. She kept waiting for Webb to tell the Major, at dinner, and over their after-dinner smoke. But the youth did not bring it up. He retired early, saying he was tired from the trip. The lieutenant and the rest of the staff had left, and the great dining-room was empty save for Claire and her father.

Finally Claire gathered the courage to tell the Major. She saw his face go pale, saw the old baffled hurt rise into his eyes.

"Why couldn't he tell me himself?" he said. A thin anger began to replace the hurt. "What kind of a man is he, anyway?"

He turned toward the stairway, cheeks sucked in, lips pinched tight. She had seen the same look on his face when he had been forced to chastise Webb in their childhood—not allowing the punishment to be a reaction to his own outrage, doing it as a duty, meting out a whipping as methodically as he would mete out justice in the court-room. With this time-honored expression in his face, he started toward the stairs. She caught him by the newel post.

"Please, Dad—not while you're so upset. Wait till breakfast. Cool off a little. I think he was more broken up about it than he showed. You know how much it meant to him, if he couldn't bring himself to tell you."

The Major stood a moment, and she saw the anger seeping slowly out of his face. When they finally went upstairs, he walked directly to his room. But she could hear him pacing for half the night.

It was easier the next morning. Nobody could stay angry with Webb long. The Major brought it up himself, and Webb was sincerely contrite, admitting he had acted like a fool, promising he would make it up. If the Major was going to be stuck in town, with this military occupation, they would need Webb's help rebuilding The Oaks. Where could they start?

The Major leaned back, frowning at the table. "You may as well know now, both of you, how things stand. We haven't got any ready cash. President Johnson has appointed A. J. Hamilton provisional governor of Texas. There's talk that when Hamilton arrives, the occupation will no longer be necessary. In that case, I'll be transferred. The army will begin grading down drastically, too. The best I can hope for is a captain. That wouldn't go very far in maintaining The Oaks, would it?"

Claire frowned in a troubled way at Webb. He shrugged, poured himself another cup of coffee.

"The last time you wrote, somebody was offering you a deal on Wolf Sink Thickets. Wouldn't that mean some cash?" he asked.

The Major rose and walked restlessly to the fireplace, lighting his pipe. "Holichek said he'd get a crew together on shares and clean the cattle out of Wolf Sink. He offered to give me half the profits."

"Which wouldn't come in till he sells the beef," Claire said. "It sounds pretty speculative to me. I don't trust Holichek anyway. He seems like such an opportunist."

"Don't make him out such an ogre," Webb said wryly. "From what you wrote he did all right for himself these last years. Seems to me he's the only one in Spanish Crossing who got any-

thing out of the stupid war."

Nadell wheeled around, staring at his son. There was a distinct pallor to his face. Then his lips grew thin and, without saying anything, he turned and walked out the front door. Claire rose angrily from her chair.

"You fool," she told Webb. "I thought you'd grown up."

Chapter Five

The House in the Thickets

HOLICHEK was busy that summer, too. He always had three or four irons in the fire. One of them was Wolf Sink Thickets. Major Nadell had gotten this section of brushland in lieu of payment for representing Ewing Samuels in a contested will. It had been a valuable enough piece of property for its water situation alone. But in 1863 a severe drought had dried up most of the waterholes for fifty miles to the west, driving the cattle in those areas eastward in search of water. Through the succeeding years, this had put more cattle into Wolf Sink Thickets than any other part of the Spanish Crossing brushland. Yet, Nadell was reluctant to make a deal.

On July twenty-fifth, A. J. Hamilton arrived in Texas. One of his first duties as governor was to hold an election for delegates to the convention that was to revise the constitution, writing in emancipation and nullifying the secession ordinance. Hamilton was a former Union general and, needing all the men of integrity he could gather around him, he wrote Nadell, urging the man to file as the delegate from the Spanish Crossing district. Major Nadell immediately put in for leave, and made arrangements to go to Austin. And Holichek thought he had lost Wolf Sink that year.

But he began to notice Webb Nadell in O'Hara's Cantina. It was the inevitable gathering-place for the idlers of the town, and the boy seemed to have nothing much to do. He showed an unusual talent for poker, and managed to stay ahead of the game for some time.

One of the things Holichek prided himself on was his quick, casual ability to judge men, to see their strengths and weaknesses and pit them against each other for his own profit. And he soon saw that Webb was a boy without much core who had always been able to charm his way through life, who had such a natural attraction for women that even his own sister blinded herself to his weaknesses—though deep in her heart she must have sensed what he really was, and would someday have to face it squarely.

Holichek sat in on a few sessions with Webb and saw that the youth was not averse to employing a haymaker shuffle or a false cut when backed into a corner. If cards brought out that streak of corruption in Webb, other things might too. Holichek began to think that perhaps he had not lost Wolf Sink after all. He called in a brush-popper named Charlie Garrison who had a flair for cards, and told him what he wanted. So one January night they rang in a marked deck on Webb and put the squeeze on him and not even his haymaker shuffle would turn his luck.

The night ended with the boy signing an I.O.U. to Holichek for three hundred dollars. Holichek knew what it would mean to the Major if he found

his boy had been gambling and had lost money they couldn't even pay back; and he could see that it worried Webb. So he invited him to the bar for a drink and got the talk around to the Wolf Sink Thickets.

"Can't understand why your dad's so obstinate on that deal. He's no cattleman. He certainly doesn't plan to work the thickets himself."

"Claire's been pounding at him." Webb was bent moodily over the bar, toying with his glass. "She thinks we should wait for a cash deal. Why are you so interested in those thickets anyway? There's thousands of cattle in the free graze around here."

Holichek told him that in a couple of months a man wouldn't be able to make any money on the free graze. With thousands of troops returning, the thickets would be so full of mavericks they'd trip over each other. The competition would be bitter and it would spread the profits out thin. Only a man on his own land, with the legal right to exclude all others, would be ahead of the game. An option on Wolf Sink would put a man in that position. Holichek leaned close, lowering his voice.

"I have it on good authority, Webb, the cattle market is going to boom next year—"

"You heard from Big Bob?" the boy asked absently.

Some of the geniality left Holichek. Why did they always have to think he got all his information from his brother? Didn't they give him credit for doing anything on his own? But he could see how it would validate the information, for Webb, and swallowed his pride.

"Yes; Bob's down in Austin, right in with the big boys. He told me beef at five dollars a head this year would be going for thirty or forty next spring. Now what's the most you could expect by taking cash for Wolf Sink?"

Webb shook his head. "Probably not a thousand dollars hard money in the whole town."

"That's it. But with this option, you'd get half of every dollar I made when I hit New Orleans with those cattle. There must be five thousand mavericks in Wolf Sink, Webb. Forty dollars a head. Figure it up. Wouldn't your father be a fool to sacrifice that kind of money for a penny-ante cash deal now?"

Some of the moody indifference left Webb's face; he stared into the backbar mirror, and Holichek saw the possibilities of the thing passing through him. Holichek put his arm over the boy's shoulder, taking him huskily into his confidence.

"You have a way with people, Webb. I think that if you really wanted to you could convince your father that this is the right thing. Particularly if Claire happened to be in town shopping at the time, or something. You know what I mean. Women don't understand business. Let her get under your dad's skin and she's liable to lose the biggest chance he ever had. The biggest chance you ever had, Webb."

He saw Webb frown, and knew what he was thinking; and now he drew upon his shrewd estimate of the youth. "And when I say you, Webb, I'm not speaking of the family in general. The Major will get every penny that's coming to him. But so will you, my boy."

Webb's eyes lost their youth suddenly; the surface of them took on a hard and brittle reflection, as they swung to Holichek.

"Are you talking about the I.O.U.?"

"More than that," Holichek said. "Infinitely more than that."

Webb smiled, a secret smile. "I like the word infinitely," he said.

Holichek clapped him on the back. "Then we understand each other. There's just one thing. If the Major gets wound up in that convention, it's liable to be six months before he gets back. That would be too late. The maverickers would move in and bleed the thickets."

Webb asked why he didn't start the roundup right away. Holichek said he would need some assurance, some word; he couldn't just go in there and—

"You have my assurance," Webb said. "It doesn't matter when the Major gets back. I'll be able to convince him this is the only way. You can start roundup tomorrow, if you want."

It took a couple of weeks for Holichek to get his crew together. He made Charlie Garrison the ramrod and registered a Scissors H with the county clerk. Then he sent Garrison into the thickets with the men. He gave them a week to get camp set up and the gather under way, and then rode out to check up.

It was late February, and the rains had begun. The land lay sodden under almost daily downpours, and for a few weeks would be more like the tropical jungles farther south. The camp had been pitched near Wolf Sink.

Holichek found Garrison there, a tall, loose-jointed brushpopper, emanating the dank, sagey smell a man got when he spent weeks sweating his heart out in the brush without a bath. There was a strange, silvery tone to Garrison's eyes that made them glitter with an unnatural brightness, like coins winking in the sun. Holichek had spent a year with him in Mexico when Texas got too hot for a man unwilling to join the army on either side.

The gather was coming along nicely, and Holichek started back, with Garrison accompanying him to the Laredo Road. They were about to part when they heard the rattle of a wagon approaching, and pulled back into the thickets. In a moment, a Negro boy riding a wheezing old mare came into view. Holichek recognized him as Leander, the son of the Nadells' former cook. Behind him came the buckboard, with Webb driving and Claire on the seat beside him. The hood of a sage-green cloak covered the enamel-black abundance of her hair, its edges lying in sharp contrast to the wind-whipped pink of her cheeks.

Holichek glanced at Garrison, then touched his black with a heel, urging it into the trail. Webb pulled his team in sharply, surprise stamped against his face momentarily; that changed to a tight, warning expression, and Holichek sensed that the youth had not told Claire of their agreement concerning Wolf Sink. He knew he had to avert her curiosity from the reason for his being in the thickets. The Negro boy gave him the cue. Tipping his hat, he smiled broadly.

"Don't tell me somebody has finally bought that ball of red yarn, Miss Claire."

A youthful triumph was in her smile. "They have. An old Mexican. Leander came right away. We managed to catch up with the man and keep him in sight till a little while ago. But we know he took this road."

"I think it's ol' man Morales," Leander said. "He try to sell Mistah Samu'ls one o' them wooden saints."

"Do you know where Morales lives?" Webb asked.

Holichek frowned. "Never been that deep in the brush. But if you really want to find it, Garrison and I would be glad to go with you. You're getting pretty deep in the thickets, Miss Claire, and it might not be too safe for a girl like you."

Her chin lifted and her eyes glowed. "This is my country and I see no reason to fear any part of it."

He scratched wryly at his spade beard. "I know what's in your mind. I don't expect to find Bandine with them kids, and I wouldn't care if he was there. All that was the army's business and I just offered my help out of respect for your father. Why don't you let me ride with you? I'd like to see how those little buttons are getting along myself."

His eyes were twinkling and his grin was almost sheepish. She studied him closely, and then said:

"I think you mean it."

"Of course I do. Maybe Bandine and I have never seen eye to eye, but I'd give a lot to have a couple of buttons like Rusty and Kit."

He saw all the reserve melt from her, and she gave him a full, dazzling smile. "You surprise me, Mr. Holichek. This is a side of you I had never suspected."

He leaned toward her, sweeping off his flat-topped hat in mock gallantry. "In the blackest heart, Miss Claire, there's a ray of light somewhere."

IT TOOK THEM the best part of the day to reach Morales's place, fighting their way through the thickest brush Claire had ever seen, fording swollen streams that in another three months would be bone-dry, struggling through draws choked with devil's head that stabbed at the horses till they squealed and fought the bit. Later on it grew dark in the east and a rain swept in on a whipping wind and the men put on their slickers and Webb rolled down the canvas top.

Garrison found signs where the Mexican's wagon had turned off the Laredo Road onto a game trace, and they wheeled eastward into vast stretches of sodden mesquite and dripping chaparral. They never caught sight of the man they were following, but Garrison was a good tracker, and a wagon left more sign than a man ahorse.

Finally, in the last hours of the rain-whipped afternoon, the dense entanglements parted around a small clearing. The house set within this island in the sea of brush was typical of the land, a long building, low to the ground, adobe. Sunk over its rims in the viscid mud of the dooryard was an ancient linchpin wagon, a ragged little brush pony in its harness.

Holichek stepped off his horse and knocked at the door. After a long wait it swung open on its rawhide hinges, and an old Mexican stood there. His face was as shriveled and wrinkled as a bean pod dried in the sun, but his eyes darted across all of them with a birdlike sharpness. Though Claire had heard Bandine speak of Santero Morales, she had never seen the man before. Apparently Holichek hadn't either, for he asked:

"*Habla ingles?*"

"Yes," the old man said gravely. "I speak the English."

Holichek introduced himself and the others and then told Morales they were hunting Bandine's children. The old man shook his head, saying that they

were not here. Holichek asked him why he had bought the red yarn. The old man said he hadn't bought any red yarn. Claire climbed down from the wagon, lifting out the basket they had brought. She walked to the door and took the cover off its contents.

"We aren't going to harm the children. Look. We've only brought them food and clothing."

Morales frowned at them, but before he could speak, Adah appeared in the doorway behind him. The dim light left gaunt shadows in the hollows of her bony temples, and her work-reddened hands were clenched defiantly.

"You can't get Emery this way," she said. "He ain't here."

"We aren't after Emery," Claire said. "We went through the attic. Here's a suit my brother wore when he was five. And a dress of mine. It may be a little big, but you can fix it. And these coats. They need them, Adah, you know they do. It's already getting so cold."

She broke off as Rusty appeared from the gloom of the room, peering curiously around Adah's skirts. "Injums?" he asked hopefully.

None of them answered. They were all looking down at him. His eyes looked enormous in his thin little face; his cheeks held a parchmentlike pallor beneath the thickly spattered freckles. Adah had patched and sewed his clothes in a dozen places to hold them together, but they were still little better than rags. For shoes he had pieces of buckskin tied around his feet with rawhide thongs. He was shivering noticeably in the chill of the open door.

At last Adah raised her gaze from him, to look at Claire. Her eyes were squinted and suspiciously wet.

"All right," she said. "Come in."

Claire stepped into the barren room, with the men crowding in behind her. Her first impression was of the hand-carved wooden figures. They seemed to be everywhere, standing in ranks upon shelves, peering from innumerable niches in the adobe, lined up on the floor against the wall. Claire's attention was arrested by one figure mounted on a snow-white horse, two miniature straw sombreros on his head. The old Mexican smiled shyly.

"That one is Santiago, the patron saint of Spain. I make for him two hat, you see. He come long way. One maybe would wear out before he get here."

Claire smiled, realizing why they called him Santero. He was a carver of saints, a carry-over from the earlier days when each Mexican village had its *santero* just as it had a blacksmith or a butcher. It sent a strange feeling through Claire to know that these were the things that had partaken in the molding of Emery Bandine—the fey old man with the birdlike eyes and the simple faith of another age, this barren room with its countless wooden faces peering so fixedly from every corner. For Santero Morales had been a close friend of Bandine's parents. Bandine had been but twelve when they died, and Morales had taken the boy in, and had reared him as a brother to his own son, Chico.

"Where's Kit?" Claire asked the old man.

Adah answered. "She's in the back room, asleep."

But even as she spoke, the child appeared in the doorway, her yellow curls tumbled about her pale cheeks, her eyes heavy-lidded from slumber. "Kit not 'sleep," she pouted. Then the pout broke into a smile, as she recognized Claire, and she padded across the room, holding a statuette in her arms almost

as big as she was.

Claire recognized Our Lady of Carmel, her taffeta dress trimmed in blue ribbons, the sleeves puffed like a Velasquez lady. Rummaging quickly through the basket, Claire brought out a hooded cloak of green satin she had worn when she was a child.

With a delighted gurgle, the little girl set Our Lady of Carmel down and ran toward the cloak, pudgy hands outstretched. As Claire helped her on with it, Holichek moved closer, his slicker squeaking softly.

"I'll be doggoned," he said. "If she don't look like a little princess."

Still on her knees, Claire looked up at Adah, saying impulsively, "Adah, why don't you bring them back to The Oaks? Webb and I are moving out there in a couple of days. We have so much room. The children will be so much better off there."

Adah's face grew stiff. "You think Emery would have that?"

"You'd think he'd want them to be taken care of decently, if he loves them as much as he seems to—"

"He loves them more'n you or me or anybody else will probably ever know," Adah said. "But he's got pride for them too. Emery's feelings run so deep and strong they scare me sometimes. When he's mad it's like the sky dropping in. When he hates it fair tears him apart. When he loves it's the same. He loves those kids that way." She paused a moment, face darkening. Then she said, "And Catherine—"

"I guess her death was a terrible blow," Claire said.

"Nobody'll ever know how terrible. Him just back from the war, with that wound. Not able to work, no jobs if he could work, his family starving. It wasn't nothing new to him. He was that poor all his life. Bitter poor. I'd seen him rage against it before. But never the way he did after Catherine died. He went out in the brush, just like a steer does when it's a-goin' to die. Two weeks. Not a sign. Not a word.

"Then he come back. The look of him scared me so I almost ran. He was starin' right at me. He didn't even see me. His voice sounded like a tomb. 'This'll never happen to my kids,' he said. 'I swear before God, this'll never happen to my kids.'"

Adah stopped, then, gazing blankly over Claire's head. No one spoke. The fire spat softly. It was as if Claire suddenly became aware of the barrenness of the room. The oven was merely a cone of adobe, molded into the wall, and its heat did not reach Claire at all. The floor was earth, packed hard as cement, and the beds were only straw-ticked bunks built along the wall. It seemed to open the door, for Claire, to all the bitterness and struggle and heartbreak that had made Bandine what he was. It made her realize that his intense reactions to poverty went back through the years, that Catherine's death was only the culmination of a lifetime of this.

She rose slowly, her cloak whispering in the silence. Before she could speak, there was a shout from outside, the sound of stamping hoofs. As they all wheeled toward the door, it was flung open by Emery Bandine. He had to stoop to get through, and then he straightened, with a broad grin on his face. It died instantly, as he saw who was in the room.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," Kit cried, running to him with outstretched arms.

He bent to scoop her up and hold her against his chest. Santero was right behind her, grabbing Emery's arm and

pounding him on the chest as if he were so happy he could hardly bear it.

"*Hijo*," he said, "my son, I thought for sure you were not come back, it has been so long, where is the other little one?"

"Right here, *padrito*," shouted Chico, coming through the door. He grabbed the old man and danced him around, and Santero was laughing and crying at the same time.

Bandine stood without saying a word, staring at Claire and Holichek, so tall his hat almost touched the ceiling, rain dripping off its brim and running down the stiff folds of his slicker to form dirty brown pools on the floor. The glaze of exhaustion filmed his eyes. His face was smudged with grime and a bristly beard curled its ruddy mat into the gaunt hollows beneath his prominent cheekbones. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse with weariness.

"Don't you ever give up?" he asked Holichek.

"It's nothing like that," Claire told him. "We just brought some things for the children."

Bandine seemed to become aware of the satin cloak Kit was wearing. Scowling at it, he walked to the table with her, his immense spurs setting up their clatter. He stood her on the table and took the cloak off her and tossed it upon a chair. Then he pulled aside his slicker, unbuttoned his shirt, unbuckled the money belt beneath it, and pulled it from around his body.

"My kids don't need no charity," he said. He dropped the money belt on the table with a weighty clank. Then he turned to Holichek. "And if any damyankee Major wants to get this for his commissary, just let him try."

Holichek surprised Claire, showing no anger, tucking his chin in and chuckling huskily. "The Major's in Austin right now, Bandine, and martial law is about over in Texas. Nobody's going to take your money." He raised one black brow at the money belt. "I never saw such a fat one. They must be paying high for beef in New Orleans."

"High enough to go back next year."

"Be a little different this time. You'll have competition."

"Not if I'm working my own land. I aim to have the best patch of brush in Frio County, and there won't be another mavericker on it."

"Not Wolf Sink Thickets?"

"What's it to you?"

Holichek scowled thoughtfully at Bandine, as if letting something pass through his mind. "Nothing," he said finally. Then he drew a quick little breath and looked at Claire. "I think we'd better go now. You won't get back to town till after midnight as it is."

"Very well," she said. She turned to Bandine. "Now that you really don't need these things, it surely wouldn't hurt your pride to keep them as sort of a gift for the kids."

"Ma'am," he said, "if I let my kids wear them Yankee clothes for one day, they could never hold their heads up in Texas again."

It was so droll she started to smile. Then it faded, and her underlip took on a heavy, almost petulant shape; her face grew soft and full, as she gazed up at him. She could feel the insistent pound of pulse through her body.

Without speaking again, she turned and went out. Webb helped her into the wagon and climbed up beside her, frowning at her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She knew what was the matter. She

had kept a picture of Bandine, all these months, a towering man with the crevices of humor gone from the corners of his eyes, the hair curling like little flames against his temples. But now she had met the old Mexican with his wooden saints, had seen the house in all its stark and primitive impact, had heard Adah talk. And now the picture she had of Bandine went so much deeper than that first surface impression.

That her realization, now, should come so quickly and so unquestioningly might have seemed strange to one who did not know her. But she knew it was no spur-of-the-moment thing. It had been forming in her all these months, ever since that day she had seen Bandine at the inn, though she had not fully understood what was happening to her. But now she understood. Her need was as certain as the pound of pulse through her body, and her decision was as certain.

"What is it?" Webb asked again.

She would not have told anyone else. But despite his weakness, Webb had always been close to her, and she knew he would understand. She shivered faintly, drawing her cloak about her.

"Is it right to be a little afraid of the man you want to marry?"

Chapter Six

Brushpoppers

BANDINE was moody and silent through breakfast next morning. Wolf Sink Thickets was the most valuable strip of land west of the Frio. Something in Holichek's manner the day before had planted a seed of suspicion in Bandine's mind. He had planned on Wolf Sink too long to lose it now. It rankled him to deal with a Unionist. But maybe seeing a Yankee scramble on the short end of a deal was enough justification for doing business with him.

So Bandine rode up to The Oaks, standing on its height above the river, its bright-red brick dark with age and disuse now, the great round columns of its Ionic portico showing the green-gold of decay at their massive bases. Claire was surprised to see him so soon, but ushered him cordially into the library.

He remembered how, fifteen years ago, the Empire Aubussons had been the gossip of the country for months, when the Nadells had first moved in. Now the rugs were worn through in a dozen places, tawdry and faded. And the gilt was peeling off the girandole mirrors and the harateen shone like worn serge across the seats of the delicate Sheraton chairs. It convinced him of what pinched circumstances the Nadells were in.

He made Claire an offer of ten cents an acre for the Wolf Sink Thickets. She finally agreed that with the bottom out of everything his bid was probably the best they could hope for. He said he couldn't wait till the Major returned to close the deal. He told her he'd guessed that they were ready to lose The Oaks without this money. She agreed, miserably.

Then, he said, it was almost certain that the Major would accept the deal. So Bandine would gamble on that fact, would deposit the twenty-five hundred dollars in the bank to their credit and start roundup. If it was unacceptable to the Major, when he returned, the cattle would still be theirs—it would be written into the contract—and all they

would owe Bandine was two-bits a head for gathering and branding. That was according to custom, and Claire finally agreed. They rode into town to deposit the money and have Jerry Waggoner draw up the contract.

All the way in, Bandine was aware of the strange expression in Claire's face. Her lips were slack and full-looking, the way they had been the night before, and she kept her eyes fixed so shiningly to his face that it disturbed him intensely.

He got back after midnight, and did not get to tell Adah and the others about it till breakfast. He said he wanted to start right away, and Chico said he was crazy, after being in the saddle all the way from New Orleans. But finally both the Morales signed on with him, and they all rode out to get a crew. They signed on Revere, the half-breed who had gone to New Orleans with them, and who had half a dozen neck oxen that they needed, and they looked up Lee and Billy Graves, just back from Terry's Rangers in the breakup. They had all worked for Bandine, and knew how he drove a man. Santero said he was too old for that, but would pitch camp and build the corrals and do the cooking. So they made camp on the extreme northern border of the thickets, and were in the saddle before sunup next morning.

Bandine divided them into two groups, he and Chico and Revere heading east. The van of the vast thicket met them like a wall. They forced their way through tangled mesquite and whitebrush for a quarter mile till they found a game trail. Then the brush began to pop ahead.

"It's a bunch," Bandine said. "Let me get around in front of 'em, then drive 'em into me."

He put the spurs to his horse and it plunged off the trail, seeking holes through the thickets. He had a dim sight of flashing bodies in the brush ahead, the chest of a black bull, the gaunt and churning hipbones of a brindle heifer. The brush was popping like cannon fire all about him, and he was making half the noise.

A dense escarpment of chaparral loomed before him. If he stopped to find a way around, he would lose the cattle. He drove his horse directly into it, knowing that, with the instincts born of a lifetime of brushpopping, the animal would find a hole. In the last instant, the animal veered aside, almost unseating Bandine. But it had found a thin spot.

He charged through and out onto another flat, with the cattle running on his flank. He spurred his horse and quartered across the front of the charging beasts. There were half a dozen of them, brush dripping from their horns and scarred hides. They tried to veer away, crashing into a mesquite thicket. But Revere showed up on the other side, turning them back into Bandine. It put them into a mill, bawling and making feints to escape and clattering their horns.

Bandine and Chico circled them till Revere brought up the three neck oxen to drive in with them. The tame beasts quieted the wild ones till they could be driven. Then the men pushed on. In a few minutes they heard another great popping of brush and Bandine had a blurred glimpse of a bull the color of mulberries.

"That's the biggest one I ever saw," Chico bawled.

They left Revere to hold the others and ran the mulberry bull a mile before they caught it. They cornered it

up against a wall of tangled chaparral and mesquite that looked thick enough to stop a locomotive. The bull charged right into it, ripping such a big hole that both horsemen could follow through. They knew that this was a *cimarron*, a true outlaw, and that they could never run it down and drive it like the tamer beasts.

They got their ropes out and ran till they caught it in a flat and there Bandine heeled it. The earth shook as the beef hit. Bandine's horse came to a stiff-legged halt and Bandine jumped off with his piggin' strings. He threw one of these short ropes about the hind feet of the kicking, squalling bull and cinched up tight. Then he drew its front feet in and hog-tied it.

When he straightened up he saw that there were two other men in the flat beside Chico. They had stopped at the edge of brush, Dan Holichek on his fiddling black, Charlie Garrison on his bay.

"You're a little late, Bandine," Holichek said. "I got an option on these pastures."

"I thought it was something like that," Bandine said. "Can you show a contract?"

"Can you?"

"I've got one," Bandine said.

"How could you? The Major's in Austin."

"He has the option to sign it or turn it down when he gets back. Waggoner drew it up and it's all legal, Holichek."

"You're trying to pull a double shuffle, Bandine. My agreement is a prior one. It puts what you're doing in a class with rustling. I want you out of the thickets by sundown."

"And if we ain't out?"

Garrison straightened up in his saddle. The sun made a silvery shimmer across the unnatural brightness of his eyes. Chico began to sidle his horse toward Bandine, his body tight and high-shouldered in the saddle. Then Holichek pulled up on his reins, arching in the neck of his horse painfully.

"I'll find your pens," he said. "I'll put my brand on your cattle. I'll take you into town at the end of a rope."

Chico held a tight rein on his fiddling horse, listening to the crash and pop of the brush, as Holichek and Garrison rode away. Finally he turned to look at Bandine.

"The Major might have really give his word to Holichek without Claire knowing," he said.

Bandine shook his head. "Hard to say. I don't think Claire would pull a fast one on us. On the other hand, I don't think Holichek would go this far without some assurance on the part of the Nadells. But I don't think Holichek has any cash. I'm sure the Major will take our offer."

"Holichek ain't one to back down."

"Neither am I."

After that they went back and got one of the neck oxen from Revere, returning to the hog-tied bull. They hooked the lead rope around the bull's neck and horns, and hitched it the same way to the oxen. When they untied the bull's legs he scrambled to his feet and started pawing and bellowing and try-

ing to jerk free. He pulled the ox all over the clearing before he finally realized he couldn't get loose.

Then the ox began to work patiently at him, moving around and around the kicking, bawling *cimarron*, pushing him gradually toward the northern edge of the open patch. Bandine knew that it might take a few hours, it might take days, but sooner or later the ox would have that bull back at the pens, waiting for its reward of burned prickly pear or cottonseed.

The men rode the day out, roping and necking the wild ones to the oxen, gathering the tamer ones. By late afternoon they had only a dozen to drive back to the pens. They killed one beef and spitted fresh ribs over the fire and mixed up some of the tallow with meal and water and salt for the cornbread. The men were dead-tired from the grueling day, but Bandine could not forget Holichek, and put them all on two-hour watches, despite their grumbling.

Near midnight he was awakened by a bawling and crashing in the brush. He thought it was one of the neck oxen bringing in a wild one, at first. Then he heard a shout, the crash of breaking timber. He jumped out of his blankets, grabbing his cap-and-ball from its holster by his head.

In the bright moonlight, he saw that one whole section of corral fence had fallen down, and the cattle were stampeding wildly through the gap into the brush. He had to veer off and stop to avoid being run down. Billy Graves came running out of the dust, cursing bitterly.

"Damn cut of steers come out of the brush. Rammed against that fence, knocked it down. I don't see how. Got the whole herd wild."

Bandine stared helplessly at the last of the cattle disappearing into the thickets. It would take precious minutes to saddle up. By that time the beef would be hopelessly scattered for miles. At last, Bandine walked down to the trampled section of fence. He found that one of the rawhide lashings had been cut. He looked accusingly at Graves.

"Did you take a nap, Bill?"

Graves tried to meet his eyes, then looked at the ground. "Emery, I don't know, I'm sorry—"

The deep grooves of anger on either side of Bandine's mouth turned his face to a carved mask. "All right," he said. "Forget it. I guess somebody crawled in and cut the fence while you was asleep and then drove that other bunch of cattle in to knock it over and stampede ours." He turned to Revere. "Can you trail that man tonight?"

"I will try," the half-breed said.

Bandine and Revere started saddling up immediately, not even waiting for the other men to dress and follow. The half-breed found the tracks and followed them on foot into the brush, where a second man on horseback had held the cut of steers they had stampeded at the pen. Revere mounted here.

Bandine pushed hard, following the tracks through brush to a trail. Here they opened up into a dead run, Revere bent low in the saddle to spot where the riders had watered their horses and had taken a smoke, and knew they had gained maybe ten minutes on the men because of that.

Their horses were winded and running soddenly when Bandine caught sight of the silhouettes on higher land ahead. He put the spurs to his horse.

The two men finally heard him coming, turned to look, wheeled off into

the brush. It was like running cattle. The brush popped and crashed all about Bandine with the multiplied echoes of a cannonade. By the bright moonlight, he caught sight of Charlie Garrison ahead, tailing the other man. Garrison veered aside fifteen yards to put his horse through a thin spot in a wall of chaparral. Bandine took a straight line, bursting through the thicker section Garrison had avoided.

It almost tore him off his horse, but he erupted on the other side to find himself right on Garrison's tail. Garrison turned again and saw how close Bandine was and started grabbing for his gun. Bandine spurred his horse broadside into Garrison's animal and then dove at Garrison before the man had his gun free, carrying him out of the saddle.

They flipped over in midair and hit with Garrison on top. He had lost his gun in the fall but he came to his knees astraddle Bandine and smashed him in the face. Dazed, Bandine blindly warded off the next blow with an outflung arm and surged up beneath Garrison.

It spilled the man off, and Bandine rolled over toward him, trying to follow up with a blow. But he missed, going hard into the man, and Garrison brought a knee into his groin. It doubled Bandine over against Garrison, sickened with the pain. They were on their knees together, and Garrison hit Bandine in the face before he could recover. It knocked him over onto his back. Garrison lunged to his feet and jumped at Bandine. His face was twisted viciously as he kicked at Bandine's unprotected head.

Bandine caught the boot in the last instant and spilled Garrison. As the man rolled over and tried to jump erect, Bandine scrambled to his feet and plunged for him. He caught Garrison half-risen, hitting him in the stomach. It folded Garrison up like a wet dishrag. Bandine caught him by the shirt front before he could fall and hit him again, in the face, straightening the man up, and hit him once more, with all his weight behind it. Then he stepped back and let Garrison fall.

He swayed above the man, breathing stertorously with the pain of that knee in his groin. He looked around for the other rider, but could not find him, and guessed he had run out on Garrison. As Revere burst in on them from behind, Garrison rolled over, groaning. He raised himself up feebly, spitting blood and a tooth onto the ground. His nose looked broken, and Bandine's knuckles had laid the flesh wide open across one cheekbone. They were marks that would last a long time, and that he could not hide.

"Take that back to Holichek," Bandine said. He had to suck in a big breath before going on. "Tell him it's what will happen—every time I see one of you in these thickets. Tell Holichek the next time it'll be him."

Chapter Seven

Number One

IN JANUARY of 1867 Big Bob Holichek made one of his flying visits to Spanish Crossing, sending his usual telegram ahead of time to insure a welcoming committee. When Dan Holichek arrived at the stage station that morning, he found the bunch from O'Hara's already there. Ewing Samuels squinted genially at Holichek through his spectacles.

"Ain't often a man Bob's size gives us the honor, Dan. Your big brother's really made a name for himself down there in Austin."

"Yeah," Holichek said grayly. "Really made a name." He fired up a cigar, feeling the old resentment stirring within him, the mixture of excitement and antagonism with which he always greeted one of these visits from his brother.

They heard the hollow trumpeting of the stage horn before the coach came into view, clattering across the stone bridge, pitching violently on its thoroughbraces as the driver brought it to a flourishing halt. Samuels opened the door and Big Bob stepped down, grunting heavily as he hit the ground.

He was a red-jowled, flamboyant man in a steel pen coat of hunter's green, the diamond scarf pin on his cravat looking as big as an egg, winking and glittering in the sunlight. Holichek saw the men gaping at it as they hailed Bob, clapping him on the back, pumping his hand.

"What's the word, Bob? We going to let that Secessionist governor stay in?"

Big Bob chuckled, lowering his voice confidentially. "Keep it under your hat, gentlemen. The big boys at Washington don't like Throckmorton in power down here any more than we do."

Samuels's eyes bugged out. "What are they planning?"

Big Bob spoke behind his hand, voice husky as a conspirator's. "By March, the late Confederacy will be under military occupation again: Throckmorton will be out. Pease will be in. We'll have it all our own way."

He dropped his hand and leaned back, grinning expansively at the gasp of astonishment that ran through the crowd. Then, in a swift change of mood, he invited them all to a drink at the hotel. They all trooped to the Hastings House, on the corner of First and Cabildo, with Big Bob's latest dirty joke bringing up a rough guffaw, his own booming laugh rising above the others. But underneath his expansive geniality, Holichek noted the harried sense of rush that always seemed to associate itself with his brother these last years. Bob left his drink half-downed and excused himself.

"You know, boys. Only got a few minutes while they change the team. Haven't seen little brother in a year."

They went up to the room Holichek always kept at the hotel. Bob put his gold-headed cane across the table and lifted his tails to seat himself on one of the chairs. Then he stopped, flicked a hand at the dust caking the seat, and straightened to walk irritably to the window.

"Little place," he said, staring through the fly-specked glass at the street below. "I'd forgotten how little." Then he turned to frown at Holichek. "So you lost Wolf Sink."

Holichek's expression grew sullen. Why did Bob always make him feel like a kid, caught stealing cookies? "I had it all set up. The Nadells agreed to give me an option, then backed out on their word."

"What do you mean backed out? Claire brought Bandine's contract down to Austin for the Major to sign. I talked with the Major. He never gave you his word on anything."

Holichek flushed. "He's a liar—"

"Don't try to carry it off with me, Dan. You were trying to pull a fast one and it slipped up. You talked Webb into selling out his father." Big Bob jerked a cigar from his breast pocket, gesturing angrily with it. "Oh, nobody

could haul you into court over it. But it was a sell-out just the same. You knew the Major's pride. He might blow his top at the boy for agreeing to such a deal. But a Nadell's word had been given, and the Major would stand behind it if he lost everything—"

"What are you so sanctimonious about?" Holichek asked, coming to his feet and slapping the table. "I've seen you pull shadier things a dozen times a day—"

"And succeed with them." Big Bob pared the end off his cigar with a penknife, snapping it angrily to the floor. "That's the point. How can I trust you to plan anything? I understand you couldn't even get the crew to stay, after Garrison came back, all beat up that way by Bandine."

"I—"

"Never mind. I haven't got time." Bob fired up his cigar, puffing on it furiously, surrounding his beefy jowls with fragrant smoke. Then he began to pace. "This is something big. If you let it slip I'm through with you."

He wheeled, jabbing the cigar at Holichek. "In a few months, the Kansas Pacific will be through Westport, pushing toward California. It will have reached a place out in the middle of Kansas called Alibine or Abilene or something. A man named McLaine is going to put cattle pens and loading-chutes there and make it a delivery point for beef. Can you see the possibilities?"

Holichek snorted. "Who couldn't? It'll be the first decent chance for cattlemen to reach a railhead that'll take their cattle to the Eastern markets in big numbers. They'll be swarming across the Indian Nations."

"Not this year they won't. I've been working on McLaine a long time for this. He's made me his agent. I'm the only one south of Kansas City who knows his plans. He depends upon me to spread the word. But it won't be spread. He'll get his cattle, but they aren't going to come from every two-bit brushpopper that can drive a dozen steers across the Nations. They'll be our cattle, little brother, under our road brand."

Holichek frowned, with the growing implications of it. "How can you keep something this big from leaking out?"

Big Bob shoved aside his lapel to tuck a thumb expansively in the armhole of his flowered waistcoat. "Naturally it will leak out. But if we work it right, we'll have our own cattle on the trail by the time the other cattlemen hear about it, and they'll either be on their way to Sedalia or New Orleans, or it will be too late to round up and drive before winter. McLaine says he can ship around twenty thousand this year. Can you get hold of that many?"

Holichek scowled, pulling on his beard. "A lot of the soldier boys have come back and started mavericking. I guess there must be a pretty big gather in the brush all right, even though it's scattered up in little bunches—"

"What can you get it for?"

"Couple of dollars a head, if it's a cash deal."

"We'll be able to get fifteen or twenty dollars a head at Chicago. Counting out wages and loss on the trail, that'll still give us a profit of ten or twelve dollars a head. That's over two hundred thousand dollars. I told you it was big. Can you get enough cash to buy here?"

Holichek's head snapped up angrily. "You know I don't have that kind of money."

Bob snorted. "All right, little brother. I'll send you a check to cover it. But do it smart, don't buy them all yourself, spread it out—"

"You don't have to tell me how to make a cattle deal."

"Got to go now, kid. Keep me posted. Omaha till August, Chicago through September, Washington after that. Same hotels."

He scooped his cane off the table and swept out. Holichek followed him down and they went with the crowd to the stage. Holichek stood apart from the others, forgotten in the moment of departure. It only deepened the resentment in him. It seemed as if he had been toadying to Bob all his life. Running his errands, doing his dirty work, taking lickings from him when they were kids, losing jobs to him when they were older.

Losing Carrie.

His eyes went bleak and empty with the thought. He wondered if he would ever feel that way about a woman again. He had thought it was one thing he would not lose to Bob. Carrie had never actually committed herself, but there had been so much between them, and Holichek had been so sure he had seen it in her the way it had been in him—

And had awakened that morning to find both of them gone, Big Bob and Carrie.

He hadn't seen her since. He could never bring himself to ask, but from the few things that had been dropped, he sensed that Bob and Carrie didn't have much of a marriage left. It didn't matter. It didn't bring her back. . . .

With the coach gone, the crowd drifted back to O'Hara's, still talking about Bob's surprising news. Holichek trailed along, gnawing at his cigar, feeling an almost uncontrollable impulse to tell them about the cattle deal. The hottest thing that had hit Texas in ten years. It would rock them on their heels. Then they'd know who the Big Man was, they'd know who had the real word.

He did not drink with them because he knew if he got drunk he would spill it. After a while they drifted off, and O'Hara's swamper was moving through the gloomy room lighting the kerosene lamps. Holichek saw Webb at a rear table, idly playing solitaire. He walked back to the boy with his drink and took a chair.

For a while, Webb had been stiff and defensive with Holichek, probably over the Wolf Sink fiasco. It had left him now, however, and he had settled back into his shallow flippancy.

"Big Bob give you a hot tip?" he asked.

Holichek's humor left him. "No," he said. "But I've been working on something, if you want in on it."

Webb's smile was lopsided. "Always got some little deal working, haven't you?"

Holichek said sharply, "This is big—"

"That's what you said about the Wolf Sink deal. But I've talked with Bandine. He said there aren't any five thousand mavericks in there. And they aren't going to bring any more in New Orleans than they did last year. I think you were just trying to use me in another one of your penny-ante operations."

Holichek felt himself flush to the roots of his hair. He leaned across and put his hand on Webb's arm, gripping it so tightly the boy winced.

"Listen, you young fool. In two months, right in the middle of Kansas, there's going to be a railhead where

cattle can be shipped to Chicago. Do you know what that means?"

He saw the boy's eyes grow momentarily wide with surprise, then cloud with suspicion. "Is that the truth?"

"Do you think I'd be sending you out to buy every head of cattle you can get your hands on if it wasn't?"

Webb's mouth gaped open. "Me—?"

"Yes," Holichek said. "I need some agents."

The boy was shaking his head, a wondering look in his eyes. "The brushpoppers will go crazy. Bandine will be rich. I hear he's got over a thousand in his gather already—"

"Bandine isn't going to sell. Nobody is. Every head of cattle that goes north is going to have one brand on it. Mine."

Webb's wonder left him immediately, as he turned to look closely at Holichek. "How can you do that? These brushpoppers are starving. They won't make enough to last till next year on what you pay for their beef. Half of them will go under. Bandine's the biggest one in the brush and he's only got a fifty-fifty chance of staying in the saddle. If the New Orleans market drops even a dollar he might lose his shirt—"

"And if one man in this brush gets wind of what's up, we won't make a cent," Holichek said. He squeezed Webb's arm again. "You have a chance to make more money than you ever made before in your life, Webb." His voice grew husky. "Do you really care what happens to the brushpoppers?"

Webb settled slowly into his chair. All the youth seeped out of his face, leaving a sunken look to his cheeks. He smiled, as if to himself, and his eyes had a pale shine.

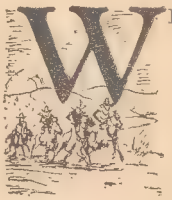
"No," he said. "I don't care what happens to them."

After the boy had left, Holichek put his elbows on the table and leaned heavily against them. Why had he been such a fool? He could have used the boy as a buyer without letting him know where the cattle were headed. Just had to show somebody how big he was, didn't he? Couldn't stand to sit back and see Big Bob have the limelight. Just had to pop off with a lot of bull like he was the only one who could tell them the real inside, make them think he was the President of the U.S. or something. He had lost the Butterfield contract the same way. Somebody had kept prodding him about how important Big Bob was and comparing his deals with Big Bob's and finally he'd pulled the cork and told them, when it should have been kept quiet, just to see their eyes bug out.

It always seemed to come after Bob's visits. He recognized it as a reaction to the sense of inferiority Bob always instilled in him, a compensation for being shoved aside like an old shoe while the Great Man was in town. But it didn't help any to recognize it. He had made a fool of himself again, and he would be damn lucky if he didn't lose this one too.

Chapter Eight

"Get Out of Town Tonight."



WEBB did more riding during that spring and summer than he had ever done before. But his contract with Holichek called for five hundred dollars when the cattle were sold, and that much money in such a desperate time would make a man rich. Webb was surprised to find that he actually began to enjoy the easy, out-

door life, the position of authority without too much responsibility attached. All he had to do was buy the cattle and let the seller worry about delivery. And he was popular enough in the lonely cow camps, with his news from the outside, his casual ease with men, his skill at cards.

To keep Holichek's name out of it, Webb told his family he was acting as agent for an Eastern firm of speculators. They weren't too keen about it, but thought that anything was better than hanging around the saloon in town. And the life had touched off something else in Webb; it had brought to the surface a surging restlessness. He knew that when the gather was over he would have to return to the empty, listless days in town. He found the thought almost unbearable. It was what made him begin toying with the idea of traveling north with the herd. Claire didn't want him to, but the Major wrote from Austin that it might make a man of him.

Holichek had gathered his cattle in half a dozen spots widely scattered through the brush. Each herd had a separate crew and none of the men in any one crew knew their connection with the other crews. Only the trail bosses knew their destination, and they were sworn to secrecy. The herds were to move out separately, in different directions, not turning north or hitting one trail till far beyond San Antonio. Webb was to work in Garrison's crew, and on the day he was to leave, word came out of the brush about Bandine.

Everyone had expected the man to head for New Orleans again. But it was said that he meant to drive for Sedalia. That amused Holichek hugely. Three other big drovers had tried to reach the Chicago markets earlier that spring by driving to Sedalia. They had been cut to pieces by bushwhackers and Indians and the Kansas farmers who had armed and organized to prevent the cattle coming through, afraid of the dread Texas fever being introduced to their own stock. The cattlemen had lost every head of beef, and had been lucky to get back alive.

It all meant little to Webb, who joined Garrison at Benavides, and started off on what was to be the big adventure. From there on out it was twelve and fourteen hours a day in the saddle and another two or three nighthawking. It was dust and heat and stampedes and hunger and bitter exhaustion. The only thing that kept him from quitting was the fact that he didn't have a dime and knew he could never find his way back across the endless prairies alone. He was almost glad for what happened at Fort Worth.

When he returned to Spanish Crossing, afterward, he didn't say anything about the knifing incident, or tell how he got the fare to ride the stagecoach back. He was still weak and pale from the wound, but everybody assumed that he had simply lacked what it took to stick it out. Webb was still a little worried about what he had said at Fort Worth, but as time went on and nothing came of it, he too forgot. He found himself gravitating to the saloon again. He had made the acquaintance of a professional gambler in Fort Worth, while convalescing, and had picked up a lot from the man. When O'Hara saw his improvement, he invited the youth to become a house dealer. It amused Webb at first. But it did something to his vanity, too. So he took the job.

He had a fight with the Major about it and moved to town. After that came the girl named Rosita, from Martinez

Alley, with the smooth shoulders and the red lips. She had been Garrison's girl, but the man was gone now. So she was there, that October night, with an early frost lying like a silver crust on the town, and the kerosene lamps spitting and flaring in the drafty cantina.

Webb was dealing for a group made up of Ewing Samuels, Jerry Waggoner, Dan Holichek, and Hammond Innes, one of the cattlemen who had lost his herd driving to Sedalia. It had been a close game, and they were all intent upon their cards when the brittle creak of rigging and the stamp and snort of many horses came from the street. In a moment the door was thrust open, and a man came in, so tall that he had to stoop deeply to get through the opening. Innes was the first to turn; then he shoved his chair back with a yell and jumped to his feet.

"Bandine. It's Bandine. And look what he drug in with him."

As Innes ran to the man, pumping his hand and clapping him on the back and shouting joyfully, the rest of them came in—Chico Morales and the Graves brothers and three or four more Bandine had taken north with him. O'Hara immediately began setting up drinks for them, and Bandine turned to him with a broad grin.

"Only one, O'Hara. I haven't seen my kids in so long I've forgot what they look like. We just stopped in for a bracer to get us the rest of the way."

He shoved his hat back on his head, rumpling his hand through hair that had grown long and wolfy about his ears, curling in a leonine mane down the back of his neck. There was the drawn look of deep weariness on his face; that red beard covered his gaunt jaw, curly and matted as mesquite grass.

"You look pretty happy for a man that lost his herd to them Sedalia bushwhackers," Holichek said.

Bandine squinted against the raw fire of the whisky, then let his breath out with a sound like steam escaping from an engine.

"No Sedalia bushwhackers that far west, Holichek."

Webb saw Holichek's eyes grow narrow, and felt a sudden apprehension run through him. Even he had assumed that Bandine was back too early to have made a successful drive. It had to be that way, it had to be.

Bandine downed his second drink, winking at Webb. "See you got a new gal, kid. Even prettier'n the one at Fort Worth."

"You didn't see him at Fort Worth," Holichek snapped.

"How do you think he got back here?" Chico grinned. "Nobody else was going to take care of that knife wound."

Holichek's massive head turned slowly to Webb. "You didn't tell me you had a fight."

Webb absently riffled the deck of cards, his eyes fixed doggedly on them. "Some woman faro dealer. Her boy friend didn't like the way I was making eyes at her or something. He had a knife."

"He makes it sound like a tea party," Chico said. The liquor was affecting him now; his eyes were glowing brightly and his lips were slack and damp. "Webb would have died if we hadn't been coming through that same night. We heard about it in another saloon and went looking for the kid."

"Never mind, Chico," Bandine said.

"Why not? It's just like Webb not to give you any credit," Chico said. He turned back to Holichek. "Bandine

held the herd up till he was sure Webb would be all right. He even gave him the fare home."

"And him a Republican," Bandine laughed. He emptied another drink and exhaled huskily. His voice sounded slurred and his grin was growing tipsy. "We ain't had nothing to eat since morning. Another shot like that and I'll be too drunk to go home."

Webb pulled his chair back, trying to sound casual. "I'll see you later."

Before he could rise, Holichek grasped his arm, pinning it to the table. The man's fingers pinched so tightly that Webb winced in pain, and started to struggle. But he could not tear free before Holichek asked Bandine:

"You didn't drive to Sedalia?"

"Hell no. Think we'd go there after we heard about Abilene?"

Webb quit struggling, abruptly, because he knew then it was all over. Holichek slowly turned to him, still gripping his arm. The blood had drained from the man's swarthy cheeks till the parchment color of them stood out in sharp contrast to his jet-black beard. Bandine saw the expression, and blinked his eyes, as if trying to concentrate through a drunken befuddlement.

"Holichek," he said. "I thought you knew—" He stared at Webb, shaking his head, trying to clear it. "Kid, I didn't realize—"

Holichek's grip on Webb's arm tightened till pain contracted the muscles. "You told him about Abilene," he said hoarsely.

Webb was gripping the cards in his free hand so tightly they bent almost double. "What did you expect?" he said in brittle defiance. "What did I owe you? Garrison left me there to die. Didn't stay an extra five minutes to get me a doctor—"

Holichek cut him off with a strangled sound of rage, as if unable to contain himself longer. He jumped up, sweeping his chair back with one hand so hard it skittered across the room and smashed against the bar. He caught Webb by both lapels and hauled him bodily out of the chair and then jerked one hand back to smash Webb in the face.

"Holichek!" Bandine bawled.

Webb did not think he had ever heard anyone shout so loud. It halted Holichek. Still holding Webb up on his toes by the grip on his coat, still holding his fist back to strike, the man sent a sidelong glance toward Bandine. Webb could see it too. Bandine had his gun out, pointed at Holichek.

"Let him go," Bandine said. He was swaying a little on his feet, from the drink.

It seemed forever till Holichek's grip on Webb's coat relaxed, letting him sink back onto his heels.

"Step back," Bandine said.

Again that measureless space of time, before Holichek complied. He glared at Webb for a long time, wheezing a little with the constriction of his rage. Finally, he turned to Bandine.

"What happened?" he said thickly.

"You won't like it," Bandine told him.

"What happened?"

"We beat you to Abilene, Holichek. After Webb told me, I left word for the other trail drivers that were coming through Fort Worth. They followed me and we found a Seminole that showed us a short cut across the Canadian, and we beat Garrison. By the time he got there the first train was already loaded and the pens were full. Garrison had to hold all his herds on the prairie and a summer thunderstorm stampeded

'em. Time he got 'em all gathered up, he'd lost half the beef. He didn't want to risk that again by holding 'em in the open. But he knew the men that were already in the pens had first call on the next train, so he tried to beat 'em by driving his cattle east and meeting the train before it hit Abilene. Bushwhackers caught him on the river and cut him to pieces."

Holichek had watched Bandine with wide, blank eyes all the time he was speaking. He spoke through clenched teeth.

"You're lying," he said.

"Garrison should be back pretty soon. He'll tell you the same thing."

Holichek's eyes dropped to the gun in Bandine's hand. Webb saw little muscles bunch and knot in his swarthy jowls, and thought for a moment that the threat of the gun wouldn't be enough. Finally, however, the man hauled about to look at Webb. His voice had lowered, though it still had that wheezing sound, till it was barely audible.

"Kid," he said, "you'd better get out of town tonight. If I ever see you again, I think I'll kill you."

Webb stared emptily at the man. He could see the rage dancing through Holichek's eyes, and knew that he meant what he said. But it drew little fear from Webb. There seemed no capacity for emotion left in him. Unspeaking, he put the cards down and turned to walk outside. He halted in the pitch-black shadow of the overhang, shivering a little in the chill, feeling the letdown in him. It was always this way after violence, after failure.

He felt no sense of betrayal at having told Bandine about Abilene; he never had felt it, even at the time. He had been delirious with his wound then, and bitter against Garrison for leaving him to die, and had babbled the whole thing to Bandine in a violent need to strike back at Garrison any way he could. After Bandine had left, and Webb had a clearer conception of what he had done, he did not worry too much. For even if Bandine headed for Abilene, Webb had never dreamed he could beat Garrison. But now it was done, the whole thing, ending as so many other things had ended in his life, muddily, ignominiously. He couldn't even feel his failure very keenly.

He heard the walk shudder beneath the clatter of boots as Bandine and the others came out behind him. He turned and said dully to Bandine:

"I suppose I should thank you again."

Bandine's grin was slack and a little silly with drink. "Never mind, kid. You'd just better leave town. Holichek's really fit to kill you. I may of gone soft twice, but I just couldn't save a Republican three times in a row."

Chapter Nine

Maverickers

DESPITE the political strife that marked the last months of 1867, the cattle business boomed. Thirty-five thousand steers had been shipped out of Abilene that fall, and Eastern quotations were zooming. Winter was not ordinarily a time of roundup, but cattle fever gripped the brush, and it was overrun with maverickers. They were a wild bunch, mostly troops just returned from a war to find themselves faced with joblessness and starvation. In their fight for survival they

made little distinction between private and public lands, and the big ranchers were hard put to defend their thickets.

Still, Bandine realized that a man who owned his land would eventually be the winner. In the first place, he would not be subject to the competition of the hundreds of mavericker's that were cutting the profits so thin on a free graze. He had the right to exclude them from his pastures, if he had the strength to back it up. So Bandine spent that winter using the money he had made at Abilene to buy land and build his crew.

He tried to make Chico a partner, but the youth did not want the responsibility. So he took him on as foreman and gave him the job of hiring. That left Bandine free to spend the countless days riding the holdings of prospective sellers, flushing the mavericks, and estimating how many head the areas held. He bought land from a Mexican whose title came down from the original grant given by the King of Spain; he bought land from families that had colonized it under contracts with the Mexican Government. He bought 4,605 acres from a woman who had gotten it as a donation grant for a grandfather who had died in the Texas Revolution. He bought three hundred and twenty acres from a homesteader who had qualified for pre-emption patents. He spent all of October away from home and didn't get back till well into November.

It was dusk when he returned that second time, with the brush lying in feathery masses all about him. It was cold and he was huddled into his canvas mackinaw, slack with the weariness of endless riding, endless haggling. He heard the piping voices of the children before he reached open ground.

"I shot you, you gotta lie down and be dead."

"You can't kill me. I'm Grampa Willoughby and I grinned all your fingers off before you even pulled the trigger."

Bandine broke free of the brush to see Rusty running down a corral fence, dragging Bandine's battered Civil War Springfield after him. It was longer than the boy and almost threw him off his feet, rattling and thumping along the ground. He saw Bandine and stopped by a fence post, staring owl-eyed at the man.

There was a rustle in the brush, as Bandine swung off his horse, and Kit appeared, creeping out of the thicket on her hands and knees.

Bandine stood grinning at them, waiting beside his horse for Kit's rush. But neither child moved.

"Ain't you gonna say hello?" he asked.

"Daddy?" Kit asked.

"Sure it's Daddy, what's the matter with you kids?"

Kit got to her feet and came slowly toward him, a thumb in her mouth. But when he bent toward her and held out his arms she finally began to run toward him. Still she did not squeal the way she always had as he scooped her up. He was used to Rusty's shyness, but it was something new in Kit. He felt how heavy she was becoming, and realized she was five years old. Was it merely a phase in growing up?

He looked at Rusty again, seeing that the boy still hung back, leaning to one side and peering around Bandine as if to see something behind him. Thinking it was merely a childish artifice, Bandine squatted down, still holding Kit in one arm, and grinned broadly at the boy.

"Ain't you the quiet one. Tell me

what you been doing, now. How many Injuns you shot today?"

"Didn't shoot any."

Bandine couldn't help frowning again. He had ceased trying to fathom Rusty's strange, withdrawn nature, but it seemed more intensely reserved than ever, the freckled face almost stony in its expression.

"How about a ride, then? You ain't topped that bronc in a long time."

"Don't want no ride."

Bandine straightened up again, shaking his head helplessly, and turned to go inside, twining his fingers in Kit's silken hair. It was yellow as corn tassel. She was getting to look more like her mother every day. It sent a momentary streak of melancholy through him, to have Catherine recalled so vividly, as he pushed open the door, stooping through.

Adah was bent over the grate, stirring something in a pot, and turned to greet him with more enthusiasm than her usual reserve allowed. He sniffed appreciatively of the cooking syrup.

"You know what that is, Kit? That's prickly-pear candy, so sticky you take one bite and can't get your teeth apart."

Rusty moved through the door behind them, placing himself ceremoniously against the wall. "Don't like prickly-pear candy," he announced.

Bandine sent an oblique glance toward him, then set Kit on the table. "What's wrong with these kids, Adah?"

The gladness left her face. "Man don't get home much, maybe he seems like a stranger."

He shrugged irritably out of his mackinaw. "I got to buy this land now or I'll never get it. With beef booming, land that goes for ten cents an acre this year will be three and four dollars next year."

"So you'll be rich. Maybe kids need a little more than money."

Bandine turned to Rusty. "What's got into all of you?"

Adah's cheeks sucked in angrily. "I guess I'd sulk too, my pa forgot my birthday."

Bandine stared blankly at Adah. Then it exploded from him. "It is. It's the tenth. No wonder he was acting that way! I been running around like a cow with heel flies. Could of been Christmas and I wouldn't of known it." He wheeled and took three tremendous strides across the room, dropping on one knee before Rusty and grasping his thin shoulders.

"Jigger, I plumb forgot. You got to tan my britches or something. How can I make it up to you? Let's go into town right now—"

"Emery," protested Adah. "It'd be after midnight."

"We'll make Ewing Samuels open up that gol-dang store if it's three in the morning. We'll buy everything in the place. Red-topped boots and city-slicker pants and buckskin shirt with fringe a mile long—"

"Red-topped boots?" Rusty said solemnly.

Bandine could see it working through his head, and laughed huskily. "Sure thing. But a man don't wear boots 'less he tops that bronc. How about it?"

"Red-topped boots," the boy repeated soberly.

He was not smiling yet, but his eyes had begun to glow. Bandine got down on his hands and knees, coaxing the boy to climb on. Rusty regarded him with a solemn stare. But Bandine saw the flush of excitement begin to stain his freckled cheeks, and started crow-hopping around the room. Finally Rusty could contain himself no longer.

"Red-top boots!" he shouted, and ran and scrambled on Bandine's back.

Kit squealed and ran after him and climbed on too, and Bandine began pitching around the room on his hands and knees like a wild horse, with both of them shouting and hollering and pulling his shaggy hair in an effort to stay on, and when he looked up at Adah, he saw that she was smiling, and there were tears in her eyes.

They were making so much noise that Bandine didn't hear the knock on the door. He saw Adah walk to it and open it; Chico Morales stood there, rubbing his hands to take the chill out of them. The intense, burning look of his eyes made his face look thin and drawn. It always came when there was trouble, and it caused Bandine to stop the horseplay immediately.

"We found a couple of mavericks in Wolf Sink burnt with the Double Sickle," Chico said. "The brand was so fresh the hair still smelled. You told me to let you know."

Bandine saw a brittle light come into Adah's eyes. He knew what she was thinking. He stared at the wall a long time before he could force himself to turn and face Rusty.

"I got to go, jigger. It won't do us any good to get any land if we can't keep the maverickers off. They cleaned out some of Innes's biggest thickets last month. He said if it keeps up he'll be out of business. If we don't stop them now we might as well quit."

There was no accusation in the boy's eyes, not even hurt. But the glow left them like a snuffed candle. They grew dark and solemn. Though he didn't move a muscle, it was as if he had slowly withdrawn himself, till he was completely out of Bandine's reach. Torn between the two forces pulling at him, Bandine sent a helpless glance at Adah.

"I suppose you're right," she said. "You got to go." Then a bitter thinness came to her voice. "You might make your kids rich, Emery, but you're goin' to lose them doing it."

MAJOR NADELL was in Spanish Crossing the morning Bandine brought in the maverickers. Nadell always stayed at the inn during the week, when court was in session. His appointment to the bench had come during the summer, when General Sheridan had deposed the supreme-court justices and many of the district judges who had any taint of Secessionist connections. Nadell knew a deep desire to see Texas back on its feet, but his experience as a military commander of Spanish Crossing had been a disappointing one, and he felt he would be more qualified to aid the reconstruction in a judicial capacity. Thus he had been only too glad to resign his commission and accept appointment to the Spanish Crossing district.

There was a lot of land litigation starting, and his eyes ached from a late study of briefs the night before. But his mind was not upon that, as he stood before the mirror, shaving himself. He was thinking of his son.

He was still not over the shock of the boy's departure. When he had finally found out its cause, he had gone directly to Holichek. The man had talked freely of it, openly admitting his plan to corner the Abilene beef shipment for that year. Nadell's first impulse had been to condemn him for it. But Ewing

Samuels and Jerry Waggoner had not seemed particularly shocked, and it made Nadell realize that to a businessman it was probably merely a sharp deal. Holichek also admitted having threatened Webb for wrecking his plan, but he seemed cooled off now.

What hurt Nadell worst was that Webb had not come to him about it, had left town that night without even returning home. The boy had written from El Paso, only touching on his reasons for leaving. Nadell had answered immediately, asking him to return, telling him that Holichek was over his anger. But Webb had not responded. Aside from a poignant hurt, it left Nadell with a feeling that had come to him more obscurely before, in connection with Webb—a sense of some dark side to the boy which he would never understand and with which he was totally inadequate to cope.

He was sunk so deep in his reflections that a knock on the door made him nick himself. Holding his finger to the cut, he walked to open the door. It was Claire, in her dark-green cloak, the chill bringing a high color to her cheeks and causing her eyes to sparkle.

"I thought I'd shop today and started early," she said, stepping in to give him a kiss on his cheek. "Have you heard about Bandine?"

"What now?"

"He's down in front of court with two men he claims are rustlers. He won't turn them over to Sheriff Geddings. He wants a trial right away."

Nadell frowned. "I can't do it. My docket is full for today."

"I knew that's what he'd run up against. An argument has already started down there, Dad. The sheriff has sent for Captain Prevent. I know Bandine won't give in to him, either. You remember what happened the last time Bandine was brought in. If the people try to help him again the lid might blow off. Things are bad enough with this new military occupation. Can't you make an exception of this case?"

Nadell shook his head helplessly. "Am I forever doomed to have Emery Bandine breathing down the back of my neck?"

He sent her down to get the bailiff and inform Bandine, while he finished shaving. Then he put on his coat and went to the courthouse. Bandine was not in sight but there was a sullen look about the little knots of men who had gathered all along the sidewalks. Sheriff Geddings and Captain Prevent were in the courtroom with Bandine, Chico Morales, the bailiff, and two brushpoppers. One was a Mexican Nadell did not recognize but he saw that the other was Henry Tevis, a man who had spent some time around town in the company of Holichek and Charlie Garrison.

Nadell waved aside the bailiff's announcement, and took his seat. "I see that a warrant has been prepared. I'll hear your complaint, Bandine."

Bandine came forward, towering above the others, looking a little older to Nadell, a little more weathered. Though many men were adopting the new Petnecky spurs, he still wore the great Mexican cartwheels that filled the room with their clatter as he walked. He told Nadell that he and Chico had captured the two men redhanded in Wolf Sink Thickets. Tevis claimed he didn't know he'd crossed the line into Wolf Sink Thickets. Nadell asked Bandine if he had any proof of the rustling. Bandine said they had a dozen cows out in the brush. Were the brands blotted? No. Then why did he say they were rustling?

"They were gathering beef on my land. What else is that if it ain't rustling?"

"Mavericking," Tevis said. "We was just mavericking."

"If you have no proof of an altered brand, and the cattle were all over a year old and had only Tevis's brand on them, the only charge you can bring against them is one of trespassing," Nadell said.

Bandine exploded. "If you had a Secessionist up here I bet my boots it would be rustling. You'd give him ten years—"

Nadell banged his gavel until Bandine ceased. "If you don't show more respect for the court, Bandine, I'll have to find you in contempt. There's no law against mavericking—"

"Damn you, Major, you're just trying to twist this up. You know the mavericking will put us out of business if we don't stop them somehow. Maybe that's what you carpetbaggers want. Be too bad to have a damn Secesh cattleman get too rich and powerful, wouldn't it—"

"I find you in contempt, Bandine. That will be fifty dollars."

"It won't stop me, Judge. If we can't get satisfaction in our own courts we'll take it into our own hands. You'll have a bigger war on your hands than—"

Nadell banged his gavel again, filling the room with its echoes, until Bandine finally stopped. Nadell felt the nausea of deep anger churning through him. Why did Bandine always draw it from him? Was it his own sense of inadequacy before the man's violence? He leaned toward Bandine, his words coming in short, breathless gusts, the way they always did when he was struggling to suppress his anger.

"In my eyes there is no such thing as a Unionist or a Secessionist. That was over and done with years ago. I am here to interpret the laws as they now stand. I am not going to let the fact that a man is the richest rancher in the county make me twist those laws to his benefit. You have no proof that these men were rustling. If you want to prefer charges of trespassing against them, I will fine them twenty dollars."

"Trespass, hell—"

"And the next time I find you in contempt, I will not resort to fine. There is an old charge against you. Failure to apply for parole. Refusal to surrender property. Texas is a military district again, you know. That could well mean you'd be sent to Huntsville."

There was an aching silence in the room. Bandine's jaws were clamped so tight little bulges of muscle leaped and jumped down their bony edge. Then, without a word, he stalked out, his spurs clattering like a cavalry charge.

CLAIRE HAD WATCHED the proceedings from behind the rail that separated the audience seats from the jury box. She saw how blank Bandine's eyes were, how pale and set his face was, as he swung through the gate and headed for the hall that led outside. She knew the depths of his rages, and felt a sudden fear of what he might do now. She followed him swiftly, catching him halfway down the hall, grasping his arm.

"Emery, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I got to blow my lid somehow. I'm going to get drunk and I'm going to bust this town apart."

"And land yourself right in jail."

"I can't help it. If I don't get drunk I'll come apart at the seams. I'll go back in there and kill those rustlers—"

"But the town is under military jurisdiction, Emery. You get drunk and

cause trouble and they'll send you to Huntsville for sure. Dad won't even have a chance to intervene. A year is the least you'll get. Do you want to let Rusty and Kit in for something like that?"

It was the only thing that would have reached him. He stared down at her, shaking his head, opening his mouth to speak, then closing it again. She pulled him gently toward one of the rooms that opened off the hall, not wanting him to be out on the street till he was cooled off. She shut the door behind her and leaned against it.

In a moment she heard the tramp of boots pass down the hall and knew it was Tevis and the others leaving. She saw Bandine's hands clamp shut, saw a white ridge appear about his compressed lips. But he made no move toward the door. He stood with his great shoulders a little stooped, staring at the floor, the breath passing huskily through him. Finally he turned to look at Claire.

"I don't know why I let a little Unionist like you do that to me."

"Can't you stop thinking in those terms, Emery? The war's over—"

"Carpetbaggers like your dad keep twisting the laws around and it'll start all over again."

"But there's no law against mavericking."

As if seeking some release for his pent anger, he caught her by the elbows, shaking her. "It wasn't mavericking. They were rustling my cows on my land. Nobody's going to do that, Claire. I worked too hard to get that for my kids."

He stopped, breathing heavily. She saw the change run palpably through him; the focus of his eyes altered, as if he was realizing for the first time how close he had brought her. Close enough for her to feel the sudden tremor run through his body. She realized then how long he must have been without a woman, how much his pure physical need of one must be by now. And she saw that the feel of her in his hands had released that need.

"Emery," she said. "Why must so many things stand between us, when there shouldn't be anything?"

Her head tipped back as she said it, and her eyes grew half-closed. He made a sound deep in his throat, and drew her to him. She met it fully with a passion of her own and did not know how long it lasted. Finally he took his lips off and held her away, staring down at her with a strange expression in his face.

Even through the tumult of her own senses, she realized that he had responded without thought to the deep and vital needs built up within him through the lonely years, and that only now was he realizing the full implications of it. He dropped her arms and stepped back, his voice trembling with anger.

"That would have been nice," he said, "if it hadn't been with a damn carpetbagger."

Chapter Ten

Giant With Spurs

FOR Rusty, those years passed swiftly, with but fleeting impressions of his father stamped upon his memory. During most of 1869, it was the new house. Every spare minute of Bandine's time seemed to be taken up with its building. Adah was

more disgusted than pleased, saying if it wasn't one thing to keep him away, it was another. But Bandine kept promising her that once this was finished, he would have more time to himself. And then, on Christmas Day, they moved in.

It looked like a castle to Rusty, set up on the high land overlooking the river. The marble entrance hall was so highly polished that the boy could look down and see the inverted reflection of the towering redheaded giant, carrying the boy and the girl in his arms, the noisy clanking of his spurs echoing into the dark chasms of the house.

Bandine carried them ceremoniously through all the rooms, grinning happily at Kit's gurgling fascination with the gold-threaded damask hangings, laughing outright as Rusty had to be lowered at each new piece of furniture to inspect the legs that had claws on them "just like lions and tigers."

The move was to mark more than one change in their life. The nearest public school was in Spanish Crossing, much too far away to attend, and Bandine finally gave in to Adah's urgings and hired a tutor from Kansas City. He was Mr. Dalhart, a shy, bookish introvert in his early forties who came to live at the house. He had a way, with his picture books, and his stories that somehow taught a boy how to make sums while he was hearing about bears and Indians and such.

But Bandine did not make good his promise to Adah. The trouble with the maverickers was growing more bitter in the brush, and took up more and more of his time. The first meeting was held at his house in the spring, with Hammond Innes and a half a dozen other big cattlemen, and Jerry Waggoner, who had been their lawyer for years now. It was evening when they went to the library to talk, and Kit and Rusty crouched like nightgowned conspirators on the landing behind the railing, huddling closer together as the voices grew louder and angrier.

"I tell you, Jerry, we can't go on like this. Shoot a housebreaker and you wouldn't even be brought to trial. Shoot a man stealing your cattle and them carpetbag courts call it murder. I've sworn out a dozen complaints. The judge just says he can't hold the man because there's no law against mavericking."

"That's why we want you to run this year, Waggoner. If we can get a man down there to back this bill against mavericking—"

"I wouldn't stand a chance in Austin, boys. One of the things Big Bob's bunch is most afraid of is a law outlawing mavericking. The bulk of you big cattlemen are Democrats. As long as the mavericking goes on it keeps you whittled down. As long as you're whittled down you have no power to threaten Bob and his bunch if there's a gubernatorial election this year."

Before Kit and Rusty heard more that night they were caught by Adah and sent to bed. For countless evenings during that spring they lost their father to those smoke-filled meetings, and finally he left with Waggoner and Innes to campaign through the county in an effort to rally the big operators behind them.

It was a lonely period for Rusty, in which he became more and more attached to the shy Mr. Dalhart. The man had an odd talent for personalizing strange lands and exotic peoples; soon the Romans and the Greeks were as familiar to the children as Chico and Adah, and Rusty knew China and India

better than he knew the back pastures.

Kit listened in rapt attention to Dalhart's stories but showed little inclination for study. It was Rusty who began to reveal a precocious hunger for reading, soon advancing far beyond the picture books and other simple primers of his age.

Toward the end of the year, Bandine went down to Austin to seek more support for Waggoner. He was gone a couple of months, and the elections were held before his return. Waggoner lost to Samuels, who had been sponsored by Holichek. It was only a small part of the whole carpetbagger victory, for E. J. Davis had been elected governor, and one of the blackest eras of Texas history was to begin.

Rusty was reading in the library that day his father returned from Austin. Bandine appeared at the library door, carrying Kit, trailed by Adah. He stopped there a moment, a haggard look on his face, and seemed to gather a heartiness with some effort.

"How's my boy?" he said. "Seems like you growed a foot while I was gone."

Rusty got slowly to his feet, dark eyes fixed gravely on him. As the man stalked over, Rusty had a vague sense of the weariness, the defeat lying in the grooves of his face. But Bandine grinned at the boy, tousling his hair with one immense hand.

With his father standing so close, Rusty had to tip his head back to keep the man's face in sight. It was like gazing up at some Olympian god, and only increased the vague awe Bandine's immense size always inspired in Rusty. Yet, with that hand tugging playfully at his hair, Rusty felt a warmth grow in him, felt the impulse to react, to laugh as Kit did, to express himself in some way. But it was a thing that formed slowly in him, inhibited partly by the awe, partly by his own reserved nature, perhaps even by an intuitive sense of the gap already growing between him and his father.

Rusty took so long to respond that before he could answer the vague impulses in him, the grin faded from Bandine's face. He turned away and walked to the chair, sitting down and putting Kit on his knee. Then he sent a darkly questioning glance at Adah.

"You been gone too much, Emery," she said. "How many times have I told you?"

"Is that all of it?" Bandine asked. "He ain't like me at all. He ain't even like Catherine. Kit don't act that way."

"She ain't as old as Rusty, she's got more sunshine in her. But you keep this up and you'll lose her too, Emery."

"And if I don't keep it up I'll lose everything—" Bandine broke off, as if realizing how angry he sounded. He lowered his head, running his hand through shaggy red hair. "I'm sorry, Adah. It just seems things are swarming on me from every side. With Davis and the radicals in, the maverickers will go wild. It'll be a regular war in the thickets, and I'll have to be out there fighting if I mean to hold any land at all. But I'm going to see my kids first. I swear I am."

He looked up at Rusty, his face haggard and drawn. "It's horse day in town tomorrow. How about a new pony for you kids?"

A new pony? Rusty felt the thought take shape and work slowly through his mind, as new thoughts always did. It seemed he had to thoroughly explore and digest them before he could react to them. As Bandine saw his hesitance, he set Kit down and brought her over

to Rusty and knelt before them on one knee.

"I mean it this time, jigger," he said, grasping Rusty's arm. "Not like those red-top boots. Nothing will keep us from it. We'll go into town tomorrow."

The excitement did not really begin to work at Rusty till after they were put to bed. Then the darkness of his room came alive with high-stepping ponies—blacks and pintos and bays—with silver mountings in their saddles and crickets in their bits, and he tossed and turned till long after midnight, unable to sleep with the anticipation of it.

HORSE DAY USUALLY FELL on Saturday, when people from the whole countryside drove into town to trade and buy animals and do their shopping. Claire Nadell joined the throng, driving the buckboard in to pick up her father at the inn and to lay in supplies for the coming week. It was a crisp and bright winter day, with the sun soon melting the patches of frost encrusting the ground. The main street was crowded with traffic of every sort.

She had to wait five minutes to get past a snarl of buckboards and linchpins before the Martinez house. As she parked in front of the store, she saw a trio of blue-coated riders force their way roughly through the crowd around the horse trading. She realized they were members of the new state police formed by Governor Davis.

She was still watching them when she caught sight of Emery Bandine, coming down the sidewalk. He was flanked by the two children, and Adah was behind him. Claire was surprised at how much the children had grown, and it made her realize how long it had been since she had last seen them. Rusty was tall for his age, all arms and legs, gangling and awkward as a young colt. Kit commanded an immediate attention from everyone she passed, with her tumbling bright yellow hair and her enormous blue eyes.

But it was Bandine, mostly, for Claire. The last few years of politics and mingling with the more sophisticated crowds in the larger cities had smoothed him down noticeably. He was wearing a gray fustian coat and moleskin trousers instead of his usual brush clothes. The coat made his shoulders look enormously broad, but it took some of the wildness out of his towering figure.

Claire saw his eyes focus on her, as he came through the crowd—saw the smile start to form on his lips, then stop. She knew what he was thinking of, because it was in her mind too.

It had been a long time since that kiss, in the courthouse, but she had been unable to forget it. A man did not kiss a woman that way without a deep and vital need for her. And the desire it had aroused in Claire convinced her more than ever that Bandine was the only man for her. Yet, seeing the stiff politeness come to his face now, she was struck again with the deep sense of all the barriers that stood between them. It gave her a helpless feeling, made their conversation a stilted and prosaic camouflage for the feelings that stirred like smoke in their eyes.

Bandine removed his hat. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Hello, Emery. I haven't seen you with your children so long I'd forgotten you were a family man."

His face darkened a little. "I'm going

to try and remedy that, ma'am."

There was an awkward moment, with both of them hanging on the brink of something, and the stirring clamor of the crowd about them. Then, with an effort, Claire said, "I'm sorry you lost down in Austin."

A faint flush came to his cheeks. "This Davis is drunk with power," he said. "Nobody's goin' to submit to the things he's started. If he tries to put those state police in Spanish Crossing he'll find he has a bull by the tail—"

She put a hand on his arm. "Emery, not so loud. They're already here. Talk like that will only antagonize them. The maverick trouble has already given this town a bad reputation. They're just waiting to make an example of somebody."

As Claire finished speaking, three men came into view, pushing through the crowd from O'Hara's across the street. Claire saw that Dan Holichek was walking between Henry Tevis and Charlie Garrison. Holichek had a hand on each man's shoulder, the inevitable black cigar between his teeth. There was a swagger to their walk, a flush to their faces that told her they had all been drinking. With exaggerated courtesy, they all removed their hats to Claire, in greeting. Then Holichek turned to Bandine.

"Didn't think the Democrats would have the stomach for town today, Emery. Some of the boys have a trough of mud in front of O'Hara's. Claim it's for any of your crowd that shows up."

"Emery," Adah said sharply. "The kids—"

"Don't worry, Miss Adah," Holichek chuckled. "I don't run with that rough bunch. I figure a man knows when he's been beaten."

"And how he's been beaten," Bandine said thinly. "Waggoner thought that as long as the maverickers kept us big operators whittled down we wouldn't have the power to buck Big Bob in Austin."

An alcoholic slyness filled Holichek's eyes. "Seemed to work out that way."

"Maybe you did some of the whittling," Bandine said.

Holichek allowed a look of mock hurt to raise his brows and pout his lips. Claire saw Bandine flush, and realized how it must have goaded him. She knew how long the maverick trouble had prodded him, knew what added pressures the recent defeat at the polls must have built up in him. She wondered suddenly how much riding he could take. Knowing his capacity for violence when he could no longer contain himself, she tried to avert it.

"What does it matter?" she asked. "It's over now. Emery, take me to the horse trading."

He did not seem to hear her. He was staring at Holichek, and spoke in a brittle voice. "I saw a big herd on my way north last year. Trail boss was running half a dozen different bunches under his road brand. I estimated three or four hundred of your Scissors H."

"Lots of free brush left."

"I hope that's where you got those cattle. If I find a Scissors H in my pastures—"

"There still ain't no law against mavericking."

Bandine flushed deeply. Then the expression changed, as if before a new realization, and he asked roughly, "Were you in Wolf Sink again?"

Claire saw that Holichek was just drunk enough to relish prodding Bandine. He tapped ash from his cigar, grinning impishly. "I don't rightly recall. Were we in Wolf Sink, Charlie?"

Bandine's big hands closed into knobby fists. Claire realized how far they had driven him, and caught his arm.

"Emery—"

He shook her off. "Give me a straight answer, Holichek. If you got those steers in Wolf Sink—"

"What would you do?" Holichek's voice was abruptly contemptuous. "Haul us in for trespassing?"

Both Tevis and Garrison burst out laughing. With a savage grunt, Bandine caught Holichek by both his lapels and jammed him back against the two-by-four support of the overhang.

"Damn you, Holichek, I told Garrison what I'd do the next time I found you in my pastures. Do I have to break you up to keep you out of there?"

Holichek reacted with an anger of his own, taking that moment to regain his balance and then lunging back into Bandine, striking viciously at his belly. It knocked Bandine back, and Holichek tried to follow it up. Doubled over, with all the air knocked from him, Bandine still managed to block the second blow and throw himself against Holichek. It caught the man off balance and sent him stumbling backward to trip off the curb and fall flat on his back in the street.

Claire saw a blue-coated rider come into view from Third, staring at the commotion. She tried to warn Bandine, but Garrison was already running into him from behind. It knocked Bandine off the curb after Holichek, driving him to his hands and knees in the street. Garrison jumped off and tried to hit the back of his neck before he came up.

But Bandine switched around and lunged into the man belly-high, arms flailing around his waist. As Garrison staggered backward toward the crowd, Tevis jumped at Bandine from the other side. For a moment it was all a wild scuffle of kicking arms and legs.

Then Tevis stumbled free and sat down hard, hugging his belly, an ashen look on his face. It left Bandine grappling with Garrison, right up against the crowd of onlookers. At the same time, Claire saw that Holichek had regained his feet and was rushing Bandine.

Claire cried a warning and Bandine flung Garrison from him to wheel around. When he saw Holichek coming at him he lunged to meet the man. Before they reached one another, the shouting crowd parted before a blue-coated rider who ran his horse between Bandine and Holichek.

Bandine was rushing so hard he ran against the horse. He pushed away from it with a grunt, looking up in surprised anger, and then tried to veer around its head. But another rider came in behind Bandine, leaned out of the saddle, and hit him across the back of the neck with a six-shooter.

Claire felt a horrified gasp leave her as it drove Bandine against the first horse again, where he sagged for a second, then dropped to his hands and knees on the ground. She tried to reach him, but the packed crowd cut her off.

Tevis was on his feet now, still holding his belly. He joined Garrison and Holichek where they stood above Bandine, staring down at him. The sound of their breathing rose gustily above the other babble.

A third blue-coated policeman had ridden up and was stepping off his horse. He was a thick-bodied man, black-browed, unshaven.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Holichek?"

Holichek shook his head helplessly. "I don't rightly know, Captain. We

were just walking over to see the horse trading. Stopped to pass the time of day with Bandine here. He started threatening me about mavericking. Grabbed me, almost tore my coat off. The crowd'll vouch for that."

The captain glanced around, his face growing more truculent at the assent from half a dozen men in the street. Then he toed Bandine. "You better get up, mister. I heard about you. We got a place for unreconstructed rebs."

Bandine was still dazed, and with difficulty got to his feet. He held the back of his neck, eyes squinted in pain. Claire had fought through the crowd by then, and confronted the captain.

"Holichek wasn't giving you a true picture. They were goading Bandine—"

"It'll all come out in court, ma'am," the captain said. A humorless smile broke over his face. "He'll only get ten years or so."

Bandine was too dazed to struggle as the captain caught his arm and shoved him southward on the street, the two mounted men clearing the way. Claire started to follow, then remembered the children on the sidewalk. Confused and frightened, Kit had begun to cry.

"Where's my pony? Daddy promised he'd get me a pony—"

Chapter Eleven

Man and Boy

BANDINE got off that time with a fine and a warning to stay out of town for a week. It was Nadell's leniency that saved him. The police tried to press the issue and have him jailed, but they could find no charge that would suffice for the judge.

Bandine had no cause to go into town for the next months, being completely occupied with the calf roundup. He was coming to realize that he had overextended himself, paying out so much money for land in the prior years. With the enormously raised tax rate imposed by the Davis regime and the inroads made by the mavericking, Bandine found that the receipts of the trail herd barely met his obligations. A drop in the beef market or another big loss to mavericking could ruin him.

Already opposition was beginning to form against the excesses of the Davis regime, and the cattlemen grabbed at that straw as a last chance to get passed some legislative measure against mavericking. Bandine found himself involved in politics more and more. In September of 1871 he was chosen delegate to the Austin convention protesting the collection of illegal taxes by Davis. The Democrats managed to get Waggoner in that year, and Waggoner immediately introduced the bill to outlaw mavericking, but Big Bob still had enough power to hang it up in committee.

That was in February, with a financial panic beginning to grow in the east. Most of the cattlemen thought it would die out, but Bandine was in no position to take a chance. He knew that if the panic spread the bottom would drop out of the beef market and he'd be ruined. He told Waggoner he'd have to give up the maverick bill for the present and get back to his spring roundup, making it a beef gather instead of a calf count.

He returned in April to find that Chico had already gathered the roundup crews. Again he was struck by how much the children had grown, and how little he had seen them during the hec-

tic years of battling the Davis machine. He realized that the only way he'd get to see them at all for another three or four months was to have Rusty go on roundup with him.

Adah thought the boy was still a little young, but Rusty was already half a foot taller than most boys his age, and Bandine said it was time he started learning the business. Rusty showed a strange reluctance to go, but Bandine was used to his reserve, and insisted. His only regret was that Kit couldn't go too, but a cow camp was no place for a girl her age.

They made their main camp on the north fringe of Wolf Sink Thickets. It had taken most of the day to reach the thickets and the men began to turn in early. Rusty sat brooding by the fire, showing none of the excitement Bandine would normally expect from a boy on his first roundup.

Rolling a cigarette by the chuck wagon, Bandine knew this was the moment he had waited for, if he'd really brought the boy along in the hope to get close to him again. But he felt oddly awkward, as if approaching a stranger. It was a distinct effort to go over and sit down on a saddle beside him.

"Brush won't be so scary, after a few days. You'll even get so you don't mind them thorns jabbing your hide. You just forgot how it was, jigger. Been spending too much time with Dalhart and them books."

"There's nothing wrong with Mr. Dalhart."

Bandine saw the boyish irritation darken Rusty's face, knew he had made a mistake. "I didn't say there was, jigger. But the time's coming when you'll have to put the books aside and learn the cattle business."

"Put the books aside?" Rusty had turned toward Bandine, his eyes wide and almost frightened.

Bandine realized he'd made another mistake, and shook his head. "I don't mean for good. Cattleman's got all winter to read." He stopped, seeing Rusty was unconvinced. He thought maybe he'd started out on the wrong trail. Maybe begin with what interested Rusty, and then lead into the cattle business. That made him realize how little he knew of the boy's interests. "Funny. That Dalhart's been around the house a long time. I never really knew what he was teaching you."

"Arithmetic. History."

"What kind of history?"

"He gives me books about the Greeks now."

"I knew a Greek once. He tried to run an outfit down along the Brazos—"

"Not that kind of Greek. Two thousand years ago."

"Oh."

Bandine felt stupid. Then one of the men stirred in his blankets and it made Bandine realize that every one in the crew was probably listening. He knew an intense embarrassment that they should hear his inability to reach his son. It blocked him from trying again.

"You better roll in," he said lamely. "Up before dawn tomorrow."

Wanting to escape the pressure of the listening crew, he walked miserably out into the brush. He stood in the darkness, trying to clear his thoughts. After a moment, Chico joined him.

Seeing the sympathetic grin on the Mexican's face, Bandine asked:

"What is it, Chico? I can't seem to touch him any more."

"Perhaps you try too hard, my friend. You must remember this. He is a boy, and you are a man. Until he

grows up, no matter how close you grow to him otherwise, that gap will always stand between you. I love my father as few sons do. Yet I understand him a hundred times better now than I did at ten."

Bandine glanced at the man, feeling that Chico had touched a part of it. Yet that wasn't all, and he suddenly knew the same embarrassment he had felt with the listening crew. He looked away, voicing the first thought that came to his mind in an attempt to change the subject.

"I wonder how big that panic will get?"

"Can't you forget that just one day? How can you get near your boy when you let this battle to get rich drive you till it becomes your whole life?"

"It's for Rusty to begin with," Bandine said angrily. "For him and Kit."

"Sometimes I think you are losing sight of that."

Bandine glanced sharply at him. There was a taut look on Chico's narrow face. Then he turned back to camp. Bandine watched him go, realizing Chico was right. It made him recall the other times he had tried to reach his kids, in the last years, and had failed.

He remembered forgetting Rusty's birthday that time, and promising him red-topped boots, and then being forced to break the promise while he went out after the maverickers. He had lost something then, in the boy—some bit of faith. And the time with the pony, letting Holichek goad him into a fight, losing his chance to fulfill his promise to both Rusty and Kit. He had tried to make it up to them, buying a pair of gentled horses a week later. But it had not been the same; it had left the faint scars of disappointment and disillusionment in them. Maybe once wasn't so much, but when you added it all up, through the years, it gained weight.

How could a man want so much for his kids and yet be able to attain so little? It had been so simple in the beginning. He remembered that day, so shortly after Catherine's death, when he had made the bitter vow that his children would never know the poverty which had killed so many things dear to him.

Now, somehow, it seemed so obscured, so tainted by the other things—the bitter clashes remaining after the war, the struggle with the maverickers, the dirty politics in Austin—all pulling and pushing him till his whole life seemed to be taken up with fighting them.

Adah had warned him long ago that he was letting this struggle to rise take him farther and farther from his kids. He hadn't seen it then. Now that he did see it, how could he stop? If he even slacked up there were a dozen men like Big Bob who would pull him down. Everything Big Bob stood for was a threat to them. And it wasn't in him to give up the dream he had for his kids; he couldn't see them go back to the bitter poverty he had known as a boy.

A wave of anger swept him. Maybe he had gotten off the track, maybe he had been fighting so hard he had lost contact with Rusty and Kit. But it wasn't over yet.

He wheeled and stalked back to camp, staring at his sleeping boy's face in the last of the firelight. Bandine could see how shaggy the brows were getting, just like his. Rusty was his son, and if he hadn't given him enough up to now, there was still time, dammit, there was still time.

Chapter Twelve

Found—and Lost

CHICO MORALES always rose before dawn, even before the cook was awake, dressing and walking out into the brush fringing camp for a smoke. From the pouch that every Mexican wore at his belt, he took the bundle of *hojas*. Removing one of these cornhusk cigarette papers, he shook tobacco into it from a reed tube also carried in the pouch. Rolling the cigarette, he next took out the red cord of timber, the bit of flint, the steel *eslabon*, all wrapped in a piece of buckskin. With *eslabon* and flint, he struck a spark that lodged in the tinder. Blowing the spark into a flame, he lit his cigarette. Then he pinched out the flame in the tinder, and returned all his primitive makings to the pouch. Finally he settled himself with a comfortable sigh and took his first deep drag on the cigarette.

It was a ritual belonging to the simplest of men whose love of the land was one of the biggest things in his life. For he cherished this short time when he could have the brush to himself, drinking in its dawn scents, listening to the familiar rustlings of the small animals, watching the chaparral and mesquite take feathery shape in the growing pearly light.

This intense affinity with the land was the biggest reason Chico had refused Bandine's offer of partnership in the Double Bit. For even at that time, he had seen the insidious influences of the struggle to rise weaning Bandine away from the land to which he also had belonged. And Chico's own love of the brush ran too deep and fierce to trade it for what was happening to Bandine. It frightened Chico, now, to see how Bandine's fight to get big was tearing his life apart. But he knew the bitter things driving the man, and felt helpless before them.

He saw more of it over breakfast that morning. Bandine took pains to explain to the boy exactly what their duties were during the day. Rusty showed polite interest, but asked no questions when Bandine was through, and the conversation died. Chico saw the frustration in Bandine's eyes, felt pity for what was going on in him. Bandine was in painful search for words that would break the barriers between himself and his boy. But he was helpless in his need for expression that would not come.

Perhaps it was the land itself which had left him that way. Few of the men who spent their lives in the loneliness of the thickets were at home with words. And having been nurtured by this land, Bandine bore its stamp. When it came to expressing the things nearest his heart, he was as inarticulate as the brush. For the thickets hid their heart from a stranger; a man had to know them a lifetime before learning their secrets.

The crew split up into twos and threes, each group taking a couple of neck oxen. As ramrod, Chico usually floated around among all the bunches, and he chose to ride with Bandine and Rusty for the first part of the morning.

Though the mavericker and cattle operators had been working the thickets for seven years, since the war, they had not yet caught up with the incredible increase of unbranded cattle that had come during the four years of conflict. The thickets were still filled with

mavericks anywhere from three to ten years old that had yet to be caught and branded. That was what Chico and Bandine flushed from the chaparral an hour out of camp.

It was a wild ride through the thickets, trying to catch those *cimarrones*. Rusty was a good enough rider in the open, but as soon as they had to break brush he ran into trouble. Chico saw him almost swept off by a mesquite branch, saw him duck to avoid a clawing arm of chaparral and almost lose his saddle. Then he was out of sight behind and Chico had all he could do to gather the beef. By the time he and Bandine got them into a mill and quieted them down, the boy had come up, sweating and panting, bleeding all over from brush scratches.

"You can't shut your eyes like that when you're popping the brush," Bandine told him. "You got to keep them open all the time. How you going to see what's fixin' to knock you off if your eyes are shut?"

"I'll try to do better," the boy said. "I started to try and head them off from the east, but those other men were over there and I figured they'd catch any that veered that way."

Bandine glanced sharply at Chico. "That can't be our bunch," he said. A sudden anger made his eyes glitter, and Chico knew what he was thinking. He asked Rusty, "Did they see you?"

"I don't think so. I just caught a glimpse of them through that real tall chaparral."

"You stay here, Rusty. No matter what happens, you stay here with the cattle."

Even as he said it, Bandine wheeled his horse and put it into a run down the trail Rusty had come in on. Chico glanced at the boy, then followed Bandine. They ran headlong for half a mile, then the chaparral loomed ahead of them taller than a man on horseback. Through an open patch they saw the pear flat beyond and the two riders milling a cut of cattle.

They were maverickers, all right, and they evidently thought Bandine and Chico were some of their own crew, hazing a new cut of beef. They merely turned at the crash of brush, showing no surprise till Bandine burst into view. Then they wheeled their horses so hard one reared and almost pitched his rider. When they saw Bandine pulling his gun they both spun around and spurred their horses off the flats. Bandine veered after them, shooting. But he didn't make a hit before they gained the brush.

"They're heading out Rusty's way," he shouted. "Get on their flank and turn them, Chico."

The Mexican was still in the chaparral, and turned back, trying to quarter in on the two riders. But when he struck the trail he saw that they had beaten him, and were ahead. His horse was faster, and he had almost caught them when they reached the clearing where Rusty was holding the cattle. The sudden appearance of the two galloping riders stampeded the cattle and spooked Rusty's horse. Rusty lost control completely and a post-oak branch swept him from the saddle as the horse ran into the thickets.

Chico forgot the maverickers and veered over to where the boy had fallen. Swinging down, he saw Bandine from the trail. Bandine pulled his horse down hard, staring after the maverickers, who were just disappearing into the mesquite across the clearing.

Chico saw the man's anger struggling against his concern for the boy, and

knew Bandine wanted those mavericks the worst way. Finally, however, he wheeled his lathered horse over to where Chico knelt above Rusty. The boy was still dazed, and they saw where a big coma thorn had caught him in the ankle joint. He cried out in pain when they pulled it free, and it left an ugly wound.

"Those things poison like a rattler," Bandine said. "He'll be swelled up like a calf with the bloat before we get him back to camp."

"We're nearer my place than camp," Chico said. "Why not take him there? Santero can cure anything like this."

They reached the Morales place near noon. The old man welcomed them warmly, showing great concern over the boy's wound. It was already beginning to swell, and the boy's face was flushed with fever. Santero put him to bed and made a poultice of prickly pear to draw the pus out. Then he insisted on soaking a dozen red peppers in a glass of mescal and giving it to the boy for his fever. But Bandine was not satisfied, and asked Chico to get the doctor from Spanish Crossing.

BANDINE AND SANTERO stayed awake most of that night with Rusty, while the boy tossed deliriously in the bunk. But toward dawn Rusty settled down, his breathing grew deep and regular. Sitting with his great frame bowed over the bed, Bandine felt Santero's hand on his shoulder.

"You see," the old man whispered. "The red peppers and Our Lady of Remedies, they would not let him die."

Bandine saw that the parchment-faced old man had brought one of his Mary statues to stand at the head of the bed, the turquoise blue of her robe shining dimly in the candlelight. A slow smile touched Bandine's mouth, and he grasped the old man's arm.

"I'd almost forgotten how it was."

Santero nodded somberly. "That is sometimes what I fear, Emery. I wish you would come back to the brush before it has lost you completely."

Bandine turned away, having no answer for that. He felt too that something was happening to his roots in this land. But it was all a part of the thing he had tried to fight out the night before, and he could still see no answer. He dozed till midmorning and then awake with Rusty. The boy felt good enough to down some of the beef and beans Santero fixed for them.

After eating, the old man took the dishes out to clean them in the sand, leaving Bandine and Rusty alone. The boy was watching Bandine, and it seemed there was a deep boyish blame in his solemn eyes.

Well, Bandine thought, maybe the boy was right. Rusty hadn't wanted to come in the first place. Bandine had kicked him out of the sack at dawn and pushed him into some of the roughest riding in the world. If it hadn't been for his bullheadedness, this wouldn't have happened. He wanted to make it up, somehow, to apologize.

It struck him that he had never apologized to anybody in his life. It was a rare moment of insight. What a

helluva stiff-necked pride a man must have to go through life never apologizing to anybody. A pride that had probably betrayed him and cut him off from people more times than he would ever know. He couldn't let it betray him now. He felt it rising already, making him feel like a fool for being sentimental. He had to fight it to go to the boy and speak.

"Rusty," he said. "I'm sorry."

It sounded so inane, so inadequate. The boy looked up at him strangely, then turned his head to the wall, saying, "Never mind. I know you blame me for being such a greenhorn. If you didn't have to stop for me you could have gotten those mavericker's."

"Is that what you've been thinking?" Bandine asked. "I thought you blamed me for making you get hurt."

"I wasn't even thinking about that."

Bandine knelt beside the bunk. "Those were only two mavericker's out of a thousand, jigger. They don't mean a thing." He began to chuckle. "That's funny. I thought you blamed me and you thought I blamed you and we was really thinking about six other things. Don't you know a man ain't a brush-popper till he takes a hundred and seven spills? I got knocked off a dozen times my first day. Ain't you ever seen my lumps?"

Bandine pulled up his pants leg to show Rusty where the post oak had clouted him when he was seventeen. It still made a bump like an egg and the boy's eyes widened in owlish awe. One by one, then, they went over his lumps and scars, and Rusty had to know the story behind each one.

They were still examining them and Bandine had gotten the boy to chuckling over the reminiscences when Chico appeared in the door. Bandine looked up to see how grimed with dust the man was, hollows of weariness sunk deep into his bony young face.

"The doctor's coming as soon as he can," Chico said. "I thought I'd better get right back. Waggoner come up from Austin special to let us know. The panic's spreading and the bottom may drop out of the beef market any day. Waggoner says the only way you can save yourself is to round up everything and dump it at the nearest market for whatever price you can get."

Bandine rose to his feet slowly, absently tucking his shirt back in over the scars on his hide. It took a moment for the shock of it to settle in him. Then he realized what would be necessary. Chico wasn't a driving enough man to handle a roundup of this type alone. Bandine would have to be out there himself, every minute of the time. It would be like those first roundups after the war, working their hearts out eighteen hours a day in a race against time. And there wasn't a minute to spare. At last, he turned to Rusty.

"You understand, jigger."

The boy had settled back into the bunk. All the humor had left his face. He stared solemnly and emptily up at his father.

"Yes," he said. "I understand."

Bandine stood there, wanting to say more, finding no words. Finally, helplessly, he turned to the door. Chico followed him, seeing the misery in his face, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"The boy will be all right here. When he is able to travel, Santero will take him home."

Bandine did not answer. It was not what had been in his mind. It was as if, all in a moment, he had found something precious, and lost it again.

Chapter Thirteen

Barbed Wire

THE panic of 1873 hit Dan Holichek as hard as anybody. It cut his cattle speculation out from under him and for a while he had to scratch hard to drum up enough penny-ante deals around town to keep him going. What really hurt was the fact that Bandine had managed to unload most of his beef before the bottom dropped out. He was one of the few big operators who had not been ruined in the panic, and was now only waiting for the market to rise.

By early in 1875 the nation was getting back on its feet. Two new railroads had reached Texas, providing nearer shipping-points for the trail drivers. Bandine began building his herds again, Holichek renewed his alliance with the maverickers, and the old pattern began once more. But it was to be changed by a man named J. W. Gates, who reached San Antonio in 1876 selling a newfangled contraption called barbed wire.

Bandine was one of his first customers, and by spring the maverickers had a taste of what it meant. With fences beginning to crisscross the prime thickets, and riders policing the fences, the brush became a fortress to be stormed anew each time by the maverickers. If they cut a hole to get in, they could rarely use the same way back out, for it would have been discovered in the meantime. Once inside, they faced a maze of fence. If discovered, a run would sooner or later bring them up against a fence, with their pursuers giving them no time to cut a hole big enough for the cattle.

Almost daily, maverickers were forced to give up their gather under these circumstances, and were lucky to escape with their hides. For the first time the big operators had a weapon which gave them the upper hand.

In their zeal they began fencing state land as well as their own. This often cut off the free graze and the watering-places which for generations had been considered open to all. The small operators who had no alliance with the maverickers began to protest. But the big men paid no heed. Holichek saw a chance to align more of the brushmen against Bandine and his faction, and when he heard there was going to be a meeting of the smaller operators at Santero Morales's, he rode out to attend.

He took the Laredo road and was passing Bandine's house, gleaming like a marble castle on its hill overlooking the river, when he saw Rusty riding toward him from the bottoms. Holichek had not seen the boy lately, and was surprised at how he had sprouted. He was almost as tall as Holichek, his hair growing in shaggy, rust-red hanks down the back of his neck. The man saluted him, grinning, and Rusty checked his horse, studying Holichek gravely.

Holichek sensed what was on his mind, and chuckled huskily. "I know you've seen your dad and me have our differences in the past. But he's always misreading me. I'm not a troublesome man, at heart. Why don't we put up the truce flag and have a talk?"

Without smiling, Rusty managed to convey a sheepish humor. He dismounted with the intensely self-conscious awkwardness of the adolescent. He started to shove his hands in his

pockets and then, as if not quite knowing what to do with them, changed his mind and hooked bony thumbs in the belt of his jeans. As young and coltish as he seemed, there was something disturbingly mature in the sober shape of his face.

"You're growin' like a weed," Holichek said. "When you going to take over that cattle business from your dad?"

Holichek saw his infallible geniality begin to get under the boy's skin. Rusty would obviously take longer than most men to thaw out, but a hesitant lowering of his reserve was noticeable. He seemed to consider the question carefully, then said:

"I think I'd rather be a lawyer, sir."

"Call me Dan," Holichek said. He took out a cigar, paring at it with his penknife. "A lawyer, is it? That's not a bad line." He saw faint surprise cross the boy's freckled face, and glanced at him from beneath bushy black brows. "What's the matter? Nobody else taking it seriously?"

The boy shook his head slowly. "You know what Dad would say. Nothing but the cattle business. He almost had a fit when I first told him I wanted to be a lawyer. Jerry Waggoner listened to me. But he was just humoring me. I could tell. I guess they think I'm too young to know what I want to do."

"In some ways, you're probably much older than they realize," Holichek said.

Then, on a sudden, wry whim, he offered the cigar to Rusty. Holichek knew it was something that had a universal intrigue for boys of that age. He remembered the delicious sense of sin that had come to him when he stole a smoke on a cornshuck cigarette behind the barn, as a youth. As advanced as Rusty was, in some ways, there was still enough boyishness in him to react. Holichek saw his eyes glow for a moment, then he soberly shook his head.

"Go ahead," Holichek urged. "If you're going to be a lawyer, you got to smoke cigars. Why do you think I took it up?"

Rusty's lips parted. "You?"

"Sure. I studied for the law. But I never could stick to one thing long. All those books to read. I had too many other irons in the fire, I guess. I still got some books. There's one that might not be over your head. *Pomeroy's Equity Jurisprudence.* Don't let the title scare you. There's some chapters you could understand."

More of the reserve left Rusty; awe made him seem younger. "Gee—Dan—"

"Sure." Holichek clapped him on the back. "Next time you're in town, look me up at O'Hara's. We'll go through the books together. Now." He jabbed the smoke at Rusty. "How about that seegar?"

Hesitantly, Rusty took it, gripping the smoke tentatively between his teeth. Holichek lighted it for him, then got one for himself. They stood a moment, puffing conscientiously, wreathed in the comradeship of fragrant smoke.

"Gee, Dan—" Rusty coughed a little. "I didn't think you were like this. The names Dad has called you, in that house—"

Holichek stamped his foot, chuckling heartily. "I guess I have aggravated him in the past. You got to understand why, Rusty. Your pa's a big operator now, and I'm still a little one. But he was a little operator too, once. He forgets that at one time he was fighting for the same things all the little oper-

ators are fighting for now. Just a chance for survival, a chance to live their life out on a few acres, run a few cattle, know a little contentment."

Rusty removed the cigar, looking a little pale. "Dad says they're at his throat. If he gave an inch they'd pull him down."

Holichek shook his head sadly. "Of course you don't get the true picture from your pa. And if you're going to be a lawyer, Rusty, you better start learning the truth of these matters." He glanced shrewdly at the boy, something growing in his mind. "I'm going to a meeting of the little operators at Santero's right now. This fence business is threatening their very existence. Why not come along? You'll get a different viewpoint for a change."

A momentary eagerness flooded the boy's face; then he looked at the ground, shook his head. "They wouldn't want me."

"Why not? Santero practically raised you. They know you ain't as bullheaded as your dad," Holichek said.

The boy started to speak, but broke into a fit of coughing. With an affectionate laugh, Holichek slapped the cigar from his hand.

"I guess that's enough for the first time. You can't ride if you're sick. Come with me, now. It's about time you learned a few things."

Rusty had trouble mounting his horse, and swayed a little when he reached the saddle. Holichek tightened his girth and swung up. Rusty started out in the lead, and Holichek followed, watching his bony young shoulders thoughtfully. It would be nice to have a boy like that, he thought.

He sensed a reaching out in Rusty, like some plant seeking the sun, and was convinced that he had answered some of the need in these few minutes. He had often seen the boy with his father in town. Something in their manner, along with Holichek's own knowledge of Bandine, had convinced him that some kind of gap lay between father and son. It gave him a sense of triumph to feel that he could reach the youth where Bandine could not. But more than that, it struck at deeper yearnings in him which lay dormant most of the time. It made him realize how devoid of any relationships like this his life was. It made him think, somehow, of his age. Thirty-seven, and not married yet. How swiftly the years passed.

Then he shook the mood off. What the hell was the matter with him? There had been more in his mind than just entertaining a lonely boy for an hour. It was returning now, the thought that had reached him when he invited Rusty to join him at Santero's. It was still vague, because he couldn't yet see how it could be used. Yet it was there. Just how lonely was the boy, and how far could he be cultivated? Bandine's love of his kids was probably the most powerful thing in his life. What a weapon it would be, if it could be turned against him.

CLAIRE HEARD A LOT about the fence trouble that spring, for her father had a fence-cutting complaint before him almost daily. But it did not touch her personally till that last Sunday in August. She had spent most of the morning supervising the Sunday dinner, but finally she left Pearl and the savory odors of the kitchen to seek out her father.

As she moved through the cool chasm of the center hall, she found herself taking a quiet pride in what

she had managed to accomplish with the house these last years. The burned east wing had been entirely rebuilt, the broken windowglass was replaced, tapestry carpets took place of the tattered Aubussons which had revealed their poverty so clearly the day Bandine had come to make the Wolf Sink deal.

There was even a new console and big pier mirror in the entrance hall, its frame gilded with matte that glimmered dully in the half-light. She halted momentarily before it, touching her enamel-black braids, rearranging the frothy collar of her cool dimity dress. Then she moved into the library.

Her father was seated at a table by the open French windows, his books and briefs scattered across its marble top. His face was drawn and tired, and he was leaning on one elbow, pinching the bridge of his nose. His hair was all gray now, and she was struck with how much he had aged in the last years. The loss of Webb had been the biggest factor, she knew. They hardly heard from the boy any longer. The last time was a year ago, when he had written from some mining camp in Colorado.

Claire walked over and blew out the lamp, wrinkling her nose. "We'll have to get some fresh camphene. That's beginning to smell like turpentine again."

"I wasn't through," he protested mildly.

"Yes, you were. Up till three o'clock last night, and now all this morning. If you must study the rest of these briefs, I'll read them to you after you've taken a nap."

He chuckled indulgently. "I don't know what I'd do without you. Run the most efficient household in the world, and that on a pittance." He shook his head. "I hate to see you scrimping and saving and cutting so many corners."

"Is that why you're going to run for State Senator?"

He rose, tucking thumbs into his suspenders, and walked thoughtfully across the room. "It would mean more money, but that isn't the prime consideration. This fight between the big operators and the mavericker is going to tear the country apart unless it's settled. I want to do something, but I feel so inadequate, on the bench. All I can do is hand down decisions or charge the jury, and the fighting goes right on. It's been so completely partisan up to now, in Austin. I'm sure that an arbitrator with the respect of both sides could bring them together and settle it."

"But why must you throw in with Big Bob?"

"Obviously I can't run on the Democratic ticket, my dear, and I can't make it alone—"

"But Bob doesn't rightly belong to any party, Dad. He and his bunch are the dirtiest politicians in Austin, just affiliating themselves with whoever they think can do them the most good. They were hand in glove with Davis—"

"Which was no crime," Nadell said. "Davis may have been misguided, but I'm convinced he was utterly sincere. Bob has fought for a lot of fine things. It's on record that he's been pushing this new school bond for years—"

"Which makes a marvelously pious smoke screen for the dirty deals he pulls under the table."

"You forget how much time I spent in Austin, Claire. Bob has enemies, any man in politics has. But I never saw any proof to back up these accusations against him. He's promised me the sup-

port on every plank I specified—"

"And the minute you're elected they'll start forcing you to compromise. They don't want any maverick arbitration. This clash between the big operators and the little ones is the only thing that has kept Bob's bunch in business. All they want is your good name to suck some more fools in behind their machine—"

"Now, now, Claire." He walked to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I think your feelings for Bandine are swaying you. He hates both the Holicheks and you're letting it color your own thinking."

Her eyes widened a little, in surprise. She had told Webb how she felt about Bandine, never her father. Nadell chuckled indulgently.

"You may think I'm blind to some things, but I've known you were in love with Bandine for a long time. It shows, when he's around."

"And you aren't angry?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "At first, I suppose I was. But perhaps the years have mellowed me. Bandine doesn't seem so much the villain any more. He's caught up in this just like the rest of us. The whole thing is another inevitable cycle, like the war, and most of us are pawns, little and big, pushed this way and that—" He broke off to grin wryly. "But that sounds sententious, doesn't it? And we were talking about you. You usually get what you go after, but I must say you have a peculiar way of going after Bandine."

She looked down at her hands, locked together. "I have to wait for something."

"His wife?"

She nodded faintly. "Catherine is still with Bandine. It wouldn't make any difference if all these other issues no longer stood between us. She'd still be there. And I can't do anything about that."

He sighed. "I suppose you're right. Time alone will have to heal it. I never had the desire to marry again, after your mother's death. But not a man like Bandine. He's too vital, too earthy. No matter how much he loved Catherine, I can't see him going without a woman for the rest of his life."

She looked up at him again, feeling he had struck a truth. "How can you see these things so clearly, in Bandine, and yet be so blind to what goes on in Holichek?"

He frowned, then turned from her, walking to the window, staring out. "I still think you're maligning Holichek. But perhaps I'm wrong. It has always been the dark side of men, their violence, their evil, that has left me feeling so baffled and impotent. Perhaps some men were meant to understand only the gentle side. Perhaps that's why I see these things in Bandine."

She was silent for a moment, feeling closer to her father in that moment than she had been in a long time. Before she could speak again, Pearl's boy came hesitantly into the door. He said there were some men outside who wished to see the judge.

Nadell told Leander to let them in, and turned to get his coat. He had it on when the trio of men appeared, holding their hats in their hands, spurs clattering on the floor. It was Santero Morales and the half-breed Revere and a white man Claire did not know.

"There is a dozen more of us outside," Santero told Nadell. "We ask you to come with us, Judge. We are going to Bandine, in a last effort to end this fence trouble before it ruins us completely."

Chapter Fourteen

Man in a Corner

THAT day was an unfortunate choice, for Santero and the others. Kit was leaving for Kansas City. She was fourteen, now, and already most of the other daughters of the bigger cattlemen had been sent to finishing schools in the East. Last year Cathy Innes had started to Miss Primm's in Kansas City, and Kit had been pleading to join her ever since. Bandine had never been able to deny his daughter anything, and he had finally yielded to social as well as personal pressure. It was in reality one of the saddest moments of his life.

For a long time he had felt much closer to Kit than to Rusty. Sometimes it seemed that she was really all he had left. With her vivid, youthful beauty and her bubbling nature, she was loved by everyone. His enforced absences did not seem to form a gap between them, the way they did with Rusty. She met him with as much gaiety and affection as if he had not been gone an hour.

It was his pride and joy to take her driving into town, or to one of the other big houses along the river. Sometimes he thought her endless prattle about gowns and boys and cotillions was rather empty, but it gave him a sense of ease with her that he never knew with Rusty. Although she seemed to do most of the talking when they were together, he could still amuse her with a wry comment, and even the Grandpa Willoughby stories sent her into gales of laughter, if he caught her in the right mood.

He felt morose as an old bull sulling out in the thickets, as he sat alone in the library, listening to the bustle of preparations for departure fill the house. He had felt left out of it from the moment he had agreed that she could go. She had become forever closeted with Adah, in an endless discussion of what to wear and what to do, and then there had been the packing, in which he could be no help at all.

Kit darted past the door, fresh and prim in new calico dress, and then stopped and came back to peek around the edge. "You'd better get dressed. Almost time to go."

"Kit," he said. "Come here a minute."

She came in, holding a handful of hair ribbons, a puzzled look on her face. He beckoned her to come on until she stood beside the worn leather armchair. He gazed up at her, thinking how much she looked like Catherine. Then he reached up to twine his fingers in her corn-yellow hair, the way he had done so often before. With a little giggle, she pushed his hand away.

"You'll muss it."

He dropped his hand back to the chair arm, sighing heavily. Why was he always so inadequate with words? Even with her, now. Wanting to express the loss this meant to him, unable to find the the right words.

"Kit."

"Yes, Dad."

"You'll miss me?"

"Of course I will, old silly." She leaned down to peck him on the forehead, then turned to go.

He caught her hand, holding her back a moment longer. "You'll come back next summer, you promise."

"I will, I will. Where else would I go? Now I've got to rush, or we'll be late for the stage."

He let her go reluctantly, watched

her hurry through the door. He felt a stab of restlessness and rose to follow her, turning toward the front, his great cartwheel spurs clattering destructively across the mottled red Sienna marble.

"Emery," Adah called, rushing through the parlor. "How often I got to ask you to take them things off in the house?"

He barely heard her. He gained the veranda and started to go down the steps, when he saw the riders turning off the river road and coming up through the gate. There must have been a dozen of them, with a buckboard in the lead. He realized with a start that Claire and her father were in the rig.

Some of the Double Bit crew drifted out of the bunkhouse to watch the cavalcade pass, and then began to follow them up to the big house. Bandine saw that Santero was among the riders, and Revere and Pancho and the Graves brothers and half a dozen other men he had run with in the brush long ago.

They halted their animals before the veranda with a creaking of leather, and the sour sweat-smell of man and beast was carried to him. The sober tension in their faces kept him from the usual invitation to light and set awhile. Santero took his bandanna out, wiping the briny sweat from the myriad grooves of his face.

"I guess you know why we are here," the old man said in his whispery voice. "It is about the fences. They ask me to talk, for I know you best. We cannot take it any more. The last fence you put up across Mexican Thickets cuts off all the southern operators from Blue Sink."

"Then use the river."

"You know I can't drive that far every time I need water," Revere said angrily.

"The maverickers were cleaning out Mexican Thickets," Bandine said. "If I pull the fence down to let you through they'd be right back at it."

Nadell took off his flat-topped hat, running a finger around the soggy sweatband. "They asked me along as sort of an arbitrator, Bandine. In the early days of mavericking, my sympathies lay mostly with the little men. But this fence cutting has become so flagrant that only a blind man could continue to hold you big operators to blame for all the trouble. At the same time, you and Innes and the others control so much of the brush that if you continue to fence the way you are, you'll cut off access to all the little men's water. If you could only meet them halfway on this thing—"

"I'll meet them halfway. You get me a law that will stop mavericking and I'll pull all my fences down."

Nadell's nostrils pinched in, and a baffled anger rose into his face. Before he could speak again, Santero said:

"You are forcing the decent operators to join the maverickers and the fence cutters, Emery. I persuaded these men to come and try to talk it out. But there are hundreds of others in the brush waiting to hear how it comes out."

Bandine heard a soft stir behind him and it made him think of Kit, waiting to go. "You picked a bad day for this," he said irritably. "My girl's leaving for Kansas City and I haven't got any more time to talk. It wouldn't do no good, anyway. You know I can't do what you ask, Santero."

A creaking of leather ran through the group, as the riders began to stir. Revere was first to move, wheeling his

horse around, saying angrily, "I told you it wouldn't do no good."

Nadell stood up in the buckboard, raising a hand. "Now, men, wait a minute—"

"Save your breath, Nadell," Billy Graves said thinly. "We're through talking."

As the dust rose thick about the wheeling horses, Santero settled into his cactus-tree saddle. His face was like parchment and the birdlike sharpness had gone from his eyes, leaving them dull and lifeless. Bandine felt a sudden relenting, and went down the steps to catch the horse's bit before Santero could turn away.

"This can't be for you, old one," he said in a soft voice. "You know whatever I have is yours. Run your cattle in my thickets. Use my water."

Santero's skinny body straightened like a ramrod. An intense pride gave his face a hawklike profile. "I am of the brush, Emery. My life is there and my people are there. I cannot turn on them like that. I cannot make myself an outcast."

The seams of his face were engraved so deeply by the pride and the hurt that they looked like wounds, as he pulled his horse around till the bit slipped from Bandine's hand. Bandine stood helplessly, watching the old man go. Finally he saw Claire stir in the buckboard. Her father tried to restrain her with a hand on her arm, but she pulled free and climbed down and walked over to Bandine. She touched his arm gently. He spoke in a bitter voice, still watching Santero.

"Can't they see what a bind I'm in? The maverickers were ruining me before I started fencing. If I let my fences down now I might as well quit."

"And if you don't let them down you'll lose every friend you have in the brush."

The compassion in her voice made him look at her for the first time. "You would have been with them a few years ago," he said.

"And I would have been making a mistake," she said. "You don't need argument, Emery. You need help. Is there anything at all I can do?"

Her face was uplifted to him, her underlip full and soft, her gray eyes smoky. He realized it was the same way she had looked that day just before the kiss in the courthouse, so long ago. It removed the bitterness of this moment, and took him back to that kiss.

He couldn't remember how often he had thought about it, afterward. Up to that time, it had never occurred to Bandine that another woman could take Catherine's place. He had not been blind to Claire's beauty. But he had thought of it merely in its physical terms, had thought that his love of Catherine was too great to get over in one lifetime.

With that kiss, his whole feeling had undergone a change. It had made him realize how long he had been without a woman, had made the great house on the river seem suddenly useless and unbearably empty, an emptiness which even Kit and his love for her and Rusty could not quite fill. There had been a vague feeling of betraying Catherine. But in his heart he knew that was not logical, knew that Catherine would not have blamed him. He had become suddenly conscious of other men who had married again, after their wives' deaths, and who seemed completely happy.

The passing years had dimmed the vision of Catherine which he carried

with him, and had increased his doubt and his wonder. But if the memory of Catherine was less poignant than before, it still remained. It would take more than a kiss and the passage of a few years to remove it.

He wondered if Claire saw that in him, as she stood looking up into his face. He wondered if it was what held her back, kept her from expressing the thing that gave her face that strange, poignant expression. He heard the stir in the doorway again and knew that time had run out.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "But I guess there's nothing you can do, about this."

"I'm sorry for you, Emery. I'm truly sorry."

She looked into his eyes a moment longer, then turned back to the buckboard. He watched her go, filled with a deep frustration. Then, with a curse, he wheeled to the steps. He saw that Rusty stood on the veranda, with Kit and Adah in the door, and the rest of the household gathered behind them in the entrance hall. Kit came to meet him as he approached the door.

"Dad," she said. "I wish I didn't have to go now."

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he said. "But we haven't got time to talk if you want to catch that stage."

She smiled, reassuringly, and squeezed his hand, then turned to go back in. He looked at Rusty, tried to grin.

"Put your coat on, jigger, and go down and get the wagon for us."

Rusty did not move. That intense soberness of his bony young face made it look years older, and his eyes were fixed darkly on Bandine.

"You aren't going to go through with it," he said. "You aren't going to leave those fences up."

"You too?" Bandine said sharply. Anger tightened the flesh across his cheekbones till they had a sharp, raw shape. "How can you talk that way? You know better than anybody what that mavericking was doing to me before we got the fences."

"And I know what it's doing to the brushpoppers now. I was out to Santero's, Dad. His cattle are dying off without water. You can't do that to your old friends. Revere helped you get your start. Santero was like a father to you."

"Rusty, don't you think I know all that?"

The boy's eyes ceased to focus on Bandine and his face grew stiff and set. It seemed to withdraw him completely. "Mr. Dalhart says you've built a cattle empire. All I can see is you've got a choice now, between your friends and your empire—"

"Not my empire, jigger. Your empire. All I did was for you and Kit, you know that. If I quit now, you'll lose it all. We'll be back to linsey-woolsey on our backs and starving all winter if the mesquite-bean crop goes rotten. Don't you remember how hard it was?"

The boy straightened his knobby shoulders. "If that's the reason you're doing it, you can stop right now. I don't want it on these terms. Kit wouldn't either."

"Now you're talking like a fool. You're too young to understand this. Go get your coat."

A sullen stubbornness settled into the boy's face, giving his lower lip that full, square shape Bandine knew so well. He balled his bony fists and jammed them into his pockets.

"I don't want to go to town with you."

"Damn you—" In a violent impulse over which he had no control, Bandine caught the boy by the shirt with one hand and drew the other back to slap him. He checked himself, then, realizing how far his rage had taken him. Rusty was rigid in his grasp, face white and stiff.

"Go ahead," he said. "Like I was a kid or something."

Bandine settled back, releasing the boy, dropping his hand. There was an ashen taste in his mouth. He looked into his son's face and it was like looking into the face of a stranger. He turned and walked into the library, closing the door behind him, standing against it, trying to collect the pieces of the day that had been shattered about him. Finally he became aware of Mr. Dalhart, standing by the open French window.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," the man said, "but I couldn't help overhear. You're wrong about Rusty, Mr. Bandine. He isn't too young to understand. You'll lose him completely if you don't quit treating him like a child."

Bandine knew a deep resentment of the man in that moment, feeling that his anger and defeat and helplessness were an intensely private thing to him, which no man had the right to see or pry into. The day had been too much for him and he was filled with the boiling need to strike back at something.

"I think you're one of the reasons I'm losing him, Dalhart. He's been spending more time with you than he has with me for years, in here with those books and those fool notions you put into his head—"

"He had to turn to someone, Mr. Bandine, with you gone so much."

"Well, he won't any more. It's time he quit wasting his time in the parlor and come out to learn the cattle business. I think your use is over here. Kit's gone now, and Rusty won't be needing you any more."

Dalhart's narrow, patrician head bowed, and he spoke in a soft voice. "I knew it would come sooner or later. A boy can't have two fathers." He looked up quickly, shyly. "But be careful, Mr. Bandine. Don't try to force him into anything. You'll lose him irrevocably if you do."

"I don't need any advice on how to raise my boy. You can go now."

After Dalhart had left, Bandine stalked morosely around the room. He had long felt that Dalhart was one of the things between himself and Rusty, had long meant to get rid of him. But now he found no satisfaction in it. He felt like a fool. He felt worse than ever.

In a sudden fit of frustrated rage he swept a decanter of wine off the table and flung it savagely through the French windows. It broke the glass with a great crash and then smashed all over the veranda and the wine spread across the granite in a dark stain.

Chapter Fifteen

The Trap and the Catch

DURING the rest of that year the fence-cutting war spread like a plague. As more and more fencing went up, it became increasingly difficult to patrol it all. With the legitimate shoestring operators in with the mavericking now, the ranks of the fence cutters were doubled. There were countless clashes in the thickets, but they achieved little. With nothing but

trespass or property damage to bring against the cutters, the sheriff was helpless. When it did come to a trial, there was so much sympathy with the little men that a jury could not be found that would convict one.

The legislature recessed during the summer and Waggoner was in Spanish Crossing for a few brief weeks. He told Bandine that it was the same situation mavericking had put them in—their only hope lay in a bill making fence cutting a felony. But they needed a precedent, some definite proof that the cutting was an organized attempt to pull down the big ranchers. Thus the ranchers agreed to make a concerted drive against the fence cutters, with Sheriff Geddings along to make it official, catching enough of them red-handed to make an example of them.

They did not know where the fence cutters meant to strike next. They did know that whenever a new fence was erected it immediately became a target. Bandine had just leased a strip of state land along the Frio, and put up his fences, and it was one of the spots they picked.

After Bandine got home, he invited Chico up to the house for a drink. It was a moment he had long dreaded, but he knew it had to be met. Sensing the same thing on Chico's mind, he was careful to tell the Mexican only the general plan. The big operators had no hope of keeping that from being known anyway, with so many in their crews sympathetic to the little men. Their only hope lay in keeping secret the spot where they would strike. As Bandine talked, he saw the misery fill Chico's face, saw him put his drink down untasted.

"I suppose we both knew this moment would come sooner or later, Emery," Chico said. "I can no longer be your foreman. I cannot go out and fight my own father."

Bandine put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I can tell you this much, Chico—we're not going to hit any place near Santero's pastures."

"What is the difference? He is against you now. Sooner or later you will meet him. I cannot go on like that, Emery."

Bandine turned savagely away from him, striking his fist into his palm. "I've asked myself a thousand times, Chico. Why does it have to be this way?"

"You could end it, Emery—"

"And lose everything?" Bandine wheeled back. "How many times have we gone over that, Chico? It's even worse than it was with just the mavericking. I'm fighting for my life, Chico."

"And so are we, Emery."

They stood silently, staring at each other in complete and miserable helplessness. Then Chico turned and went out. Bandine stood at the windows, watching the man saddle up in the corral, watching him say his good-bys, watching him ride out into the brush. It left a deep and aching hurt in Bandine, and he knew it would be there a long time.

Bandine made George Remington his ramrod the next day and gave him his orders. The crew were to be sent out to the Frio fence in twos and threes, as any movement of a big body of men through the thickets would not escape the notice of the fence cutters. The crews of the other big ranchers would gather that way, as well as a posse.

Bandine went out the next day and found most of them camped along the river. Sheriff Geddings came in near evening, a quiet, graying man of about

forty with a slow-moving, thick-bodied competence about him. They broke up into the groups and scattered along the fence, half a mile apart. And then the wait began.

Nothing happened that night, nor the next. Riders came in with news of other fences being cut. The men began to grow restless. Innes got fed up and wanted to leave. A couple of Geddings's posse deserted. Bandine knew he couldn't hold them together much longer.

The moon came early the third night, rising over the undulant horizon of brush like a great yellow caravel swinging into view on a dark sea. The shadows beneath the thickets then became inky pools, and the silhouetted chaparral etched skeleton patterns against the luminous sky.

Bandine was on watch with George Remington while the rest stayed in camp down by the river. Remington was a big, work-roughened man with great knob-knuckled hands that kept lifting to his shirt pocket.

"You want a smoke that bad, go on back to camp," Bandine said. "They'll see your light, out here."

"Nobody to see it," Remington said indifferently. "Chico told his pappy for sure."

"He didn't have nothing to tell him," Bandine said. "The whole brush probably knows what we're planning by now. But they don't know where we are and they ain't going to stop cutting fences just for that—"

He broke off, as he saw Remington's bearded jaw lift. He heard it himself, then, the ping of a cut wire. Bandine nodded at Remington and the man snaked away to warn the others. Then Bandine picked up his .45-70 and crawled toward the pinging. He finally reached a mesquite tree from which he could see the shadowy shape at the fence.

The man had cut his hole and was peeling the wires back. He went back for his horse then and rode through and headed northward along the gleaming track of wires. That meant he was scouting for a fence rider. After a long while, he came back and rode down the other way. While he was gone in that direction, the brush began to rustle, and Remington and the others joined Bandine. Finally the horseman came back and rode out through the hole. They knew he was going to get the cattle, now, and settled down for the last wait.

After a short while, there was a loud popping of brush, and the rider again appeared, at the point of a small herd. They were wild and jumpy steers, long horns clattering against each other, eyes rolling spookily. There were two men on swing and another pair bringing up the drag.

The sour and acrid reek of sweat and dust swept to Bandine, as the leaders passed where he was hiding. With the crash of brush to cover his voice, Bandine spoke to Remington.

"I'll take a man and keep up with those leaders. You stay here till the drag is past. We want all of 'em."

He began to crawl through the thickets, nodding at a man named Karnes, and the man followed him. They got past the swing riders without being seen. But as they drew abreast of the point man, Karnes rose too high in the brush. The rider saw it and shouted:

"Henry, there's somebody else out here."

Bandine jumped into the open with his rifle, shouting, "Pull up and raise your hands over your heads. It's point-

blank and we're all around you."

The leader checked his horse in a startled way, and started to lift his hands. But the man on swing wheeled his animal around and dragged his gun out to shoot. The bullet made a clatter through the brush by Bandine's head. He swung his rifle, squeezing the trigger in sheer reflex. He heard the man shout and saw him clutch his leg and then pitch out of the saddle.

The shots had spooked the cattle and they started running. The lead rider was on Bandine's side. His horse began to fiddle but did not run. He was silhouetted above the bobbing ridgepole backs of the cattle, and knew it. He kept his hands up, shouting hoarsely:

"Don't shoot, I ain't done nothing."

There was more firing from the rear of the herd. Bandine saw that the drag riders had tried to get back through the hole, but the fire of the Double Bit men had turned them down the fence. He knew that would take them into Sheriff Geddings. If the sheriff turned them back, they would probably veer off toward the river to keep from coming back into Bandine's crew.

"Karnes," Bandine called, "keep this one covered and get him down off his animal."

He saw Karnes running up to get the lead rider, and then he wheeled and began to run. The cattle were past, and he took a direction that would bisect the line those two drag riders would logically take when Geddings turned them back.

Even as he ran, he heard the shots begin from down the line. After the wild crashing of the cattle died, he heard more brush popping. It was getting louder, and coming back toward him in the direction he had counted on.

The brush clawed at his hat, his rawhide jacket, his churning legs, as he ran headlong for high land. He reached the toe of the ridge and ran up its spine till he was above the brush. Then he could see them coming, sharply etched by the moonlight, a pair of hard-pressed riders weaving and ducking through patches of mesquite. As they reached the base of the ridge, he bawled at them:

"Pull up. We've got you on both sides."

They veered off at the sound of his voice, paralleling the ridge, and one began to shoot. Bandine ran down the slope toward them, answering the fire His second shot struck one of the horses and it reared with a squeal, pitching the rider. The man hit hard and rolled and then came to a stop. At the same time, the other rider saw that Bandine would cross in front of him, and pulled his horse up, wheeling indecisively. He had a gun out, but made no move to fire, and Bandine called:

"Stop there. I don't want to shoot you."

Whoever was in pursuit was making a great crash, coming through the brush from behind the rider. The man wheeled back. Bandine was still running toward him, and recognized him for the first time. He lowered his rifle and ran on up to the horse, catching the bridle.

"Santero, how did you get mixed up in this?"

Santero sagged heavily into the saddle, staring down at Bandine with a slack and defeated face. "My cattle had to have water, Emery, and your fence riders in Mexican Thicket cut me off from Blue Sink. I didn't know this was your fence."

"You fool, I leased this land six months ago," Bandine said. He flung

the reins from him, stepping back. The crash of pursuit through the brush was almost upon them. "Get out, Santero. You can still do it. Nobody knows what happened here."

Santero glanced at the man who had been pitched from his horse, lying unconscious on the ground. Then that intense pride drew the old Mexican up. "You are still asking me to desert my friends and become your man. You can own all the land in the brush, but you cannot own a man's soul. I have made my choice. I will abide by it."

"Santero, please don't do it this way—"

But the old man refused to move, in the few precious seconds he could have used to escape, and then Hammond Innes and half a dozen riders came clattering out of the brush and flooded around them. A man Bandine recognized as one of Geddings's deputies rode broadside into Santero, peering at his face.

"Which one of you shot Sheriff Geddings?"

"What does it matter?" Innes said bitterly. "Both these men were shooting. It don't look like Geddings will last back to town. If he dies, they'll both hang."

Chapter Sixteen

Cotillion

ON JUNE 20, 1877, Webb Nadell returned to Spanish Crossing. Clattering across the stone bridge in the scarred Concord, he saw how little the town had changed. The same line of adobe buildings ran four blocks down Cabildo, their blank walls as yellow as buckskin in the simmering heat. A new frame hotel had been put beyond the Martinez house, but the cruel weather of the land had already peeled most of its paint off and warped its siding. The hostler ran out the fresh team with a rattle of harness, the sweat dripping off his chin and staining his shirt beneath the arms.

Webb stepped reluctantly into the powdery dust before the stage station, squinting his eyes against the blazing sun. He had changed more than had the town. He had gained a man's weight, and it gave him an elegant figure in his tailored steel-pen coat. His face seemed even more wedge-shaped than ever, with the fine waxen pallor that came to a man when he spent his life indoors.

He knew he would have to rent a horse to ride home on, and began to walk toward the livery. Sweating men stood listlessly in the shade of the Hastings House overhang, wiping their flushed necks with soggy bandannas, spitting idly at the wheel ruts scarring Cabildo. Webb let his eyes run carefully over them before he passed. He was past the age of deluding himself. He knew the face he sought.

And when he was opposite O'Hara's, he found it. The inevitable crowd of idlers loitered on the cracker barrels before the cantina. The center of the group was a broadly framed man in a black coat and a flat-topped hat, making emphatic gestures with his cigar as he talked. Someone caught sight of Webb and said something and the man with the cigar turned, and Webb was looking across the street into the black and dancing eyes of Dan Holichek.

The man's heavy brows raised in surprise, then he dipped his head at Webb, and started across the street, followed

by most of the group.

Webb waited in a sort of gray level between apprehension and indifference. Holichek halted at the curb, planting his boots wide and tilting his head back to look up at Webb. He was grinning, and he spoke with his strong teeth clenched around his cigar.

"Ten years, Webb. I hope I didn't keep you away that long."

A rough chuckle ran through the crowd, and Webb said, "No, not that long."

"What brings you back?"

"I guess I got homesick," said Webb. There was a stiff pause and he saw the waiting speculation in the men's faces and the sparring suddenly disgusted him. "Shall I keep out of the back alleys?" he asked sardonically.

Holichek chuckled ruefully, running a thumb through his black spade beard. "I will admit I was fit to kill you that night. But I'm not one to hold a grudge ten years."

Webb smiled with little humor. He still sensed some sly malice behind Holichek's bland smile, but there was no point in discussing it further.

"What's the latest word around O'Hara's, then?" he asked. "Last time I read the Galveston *News*, Morales's trial was the big thing. I never did understand how they could convict him, if Sheriff Geddings wasn't even killed."

"They never even proved who shot the sheriff," Holichek said disgustedly. "Both this Ketland and Santero were in on it, and so many guns going off nobody could tell where the bullet came from."

"I understand even Bandine tried his best to get Santero off."

Holichek nodded. "Geddings was crippled up by the bullet, you know, and it swung public sympathy against the fence cutters. The big operators figured they could use the case as an example to push through the bill making fence cutting a felony. They overrode Bandine and whipped up the feeling till Ketland and Santero didn't have a chance."

"That's too bad," Webb said. "Santero was as pure as a child."

"We'll get him off. We've got an appeal pending right now. We've got proof that the big operators are trying to railroad this through without regard to the facts of the case."

They stood silently a moment, with Holichek's hat brim hiding his face, as he stared at the ground. Then he looked up at Webb again.

"Guess you'll be seeing your folks, first. They're in town, you know. Probably at the inn now."

"I'll see you later, then."

"You do that." Holichek sucked on his cigar, smiling secretively at its glowing tip, and then exhaled a stream of fragrant smoke. "You do that, Webb."

Webb turned up the street with the feeling of some unresolved malice behind him. He heard a rough gust of laughter rise from the men, and felt a faint flush stain his cheeks. But he kept himself from turning to look, and walked on to the inn.

Just before he stepped under the first arcade, he saw his father and Claire come from the door. The old man had aged noticeably. His hair was turning white, and the vertical grooves between his brows had deepened, giving him the look of a perpetual frown. But it was Claire who struck Webb most.

Twenty-nine, now, in the full bloom of her beauty, she was bigger than he remembered, with a statuesque bigness

that filled out her dress of blue satin with deep and ripened curves. Her eyes widened with surprise when she saw Webb, then she and the Major were both coming swiftly to him. There was that first moment, without reserve, in which Claire took him in her arms and the Major pounded him on the back and they were all talking at once.

"Why didn't you write? We'd had a brass band out and everything."

"I guess I have been a pretty poor writer, Major."

"Major, Major. That was ten years ago, son. I'm the Judge now."

"I guess you'll always be the Major to me, Dad."

Claire laughed with tears sparkling in her eyes. "To everyone else as well, Webb. It makes him so mad when they won't call him Judge."

There were tears in Nadell's eyes too, and he had to clear his throat to speak again, saying they'd get the buggy immediately and start for home. As they all turned to cross the street toward the stables, a handsome lacquered brougham was driven across in front of them and stopped at the hitchrack. Webb saw that it was Emery Bandine driving.

Save for his towering size, Bandine hardly looked the same man. He was immaculately tailored in kerseymere trousers and a rust-colored frock coat. Even his shaggy red mane was trimmed to a civilized length, its edges barely showing beneath a cream-colored Stetson that must have cost him a hundred dollars. He had not seen them in the shadow of the arcade until he stopped. There was a deep aloofness in his manner, as he removed his hat to Claire, nodded greeting to the men.

"Looks like everybody's celebrating a homecoming now," he said. "You remember my daughter, Webb."

He shifted as he spoke, so that Webb got his first full look at the girl sitting on Bandine's left. He remembered her as the curly-headed tot who had entranced everyone who saw her. It was a distinct shock to see her so grown up.

She had on something white, that was frothy here, and clinging there, and gave a dozen tantalizing hints of the firm-breasted body beneath. Her hair was yellow as sunlight, pulled together behind the ears by a blue ribbon and then flared out into a heavy roll across the nape of her neck. There was a reaching out and a wonderful shining innocence in her great blue eyes. It brought a sudden throb of blood through Webb's temples which he had not felt in a long time. He bowed, almost in embarrassment, murmuring a greeting.

When the Major spoke, there was a noticeable reserve to his tone: "What brings the Bandines to town on such a hot day?"

"We've come in to buy my dress for the party," Kit said. "Dad promised me a regular cotillion for my first summer home from school. I do hope all of you can make it."

Webb saw the muscles freeze in Bandine's face. It made him realize that the man had not intended any such thing. The Major too stiffened perceptibly.

Kit must have sensed something wrong in the brittle silence. As she realized the mistake she had made, she showed a faint embarrassment; then her lips took on a pouting shape.

"Dad," she said, in a chiding way.

It broke the tension. The Major cleared his throat, forcing a chuckle. "Well," he said drily. "I guess the cat's out of the bag."

Some of the color left Bandine's cheeks. "It's not that. I thought that with the Morales trial still in the air, and all the other trouble—"

"We all know what the trouble is, and how far back it goes," Nadell said. "If it would be less awkward for all concerned, we will decline, with genuine regrets—"

"Not at all," Kit protested. "Why should it be that way? I want my homecoming to be a happy one. I've grown up under this cloud, and I'm tired of it. I couldn't play with that girl when I was six because she was the daughter of a Unionist; I couldn't go to this girl's party when I was nine because her father had voted for Davis. Maybe those things were important, then, but they're in the past now. The war's been over twelve years, Dad; the reconstruction is gone. You have no reason for quarreling any more. I know we all feel badly about Morales, but the Major was trying just as hard as you were to get him out of it."

"Your little girl's grown up in that year back East," Nadell said admiringly. Then he stepped over to the brougham, putting a hand on the rail. "And I think she's right, Emery. I've wanted to bury the hatchet for a long time. You know that from the beginning it was my greatest dream to bring peace back to Texas. There are still so many problems to be solved, and we can do it so much better standing together."

Bandine stared long and thoughtfully at the dashboard, with the dark reserve gradually lifting from his face. Then a droll smile touched his lips, and disappeared, and he said:

"I could never deny my daughter anything, Major. A Republican and a Democrat drinking in the same house will probably be the end of Texas as we know it, but you are welcome on one condition."

Nadell's face clouded. "And what is the condition?"

"That you don't try to confiscate any of my cattle for your commissary."

They all burst out laughing at that, and when he could control his chuckling, Nadell bowed his iron-gray head and accepted the condition. They were still laughing as Bandine helped his daughter out of the brougham, bowed to them, and took his leave.

Claire saw how closely Webb was following Kit's figure with his eyes, as she accompanied her father up the street. Webb felt his sister move in beside him, speaking in a voice too low for the Major to catch.

"We've forgiven you a lot, Webb. But not Kit. Please not Kit. We could never forgive you that."

In the days following Webb's return, the Major was too overjoyed at having his son back to probe for specific details of Webb's life during those lost years. He was quite content with Webb's colorful stories of mining camps and boom towns, and Webb's hints that now he was ready to settle down.

Claire had a good idea of what Webb's life had really been, but she knew any true revelation would only hurt her father, without serving any purpose. To her, it was obvious that Webb's wanderlust was even more deeply instilled in him, and that he would be leaving soon. Her only hope was that the illusion could be main-

tained for her father's sake while Webb was here.

She did not worry about it as much as she might have, for her mind was too filled with Bandine. The invitation to Kit's party had given her the soaring hope that the barriers were at last gone between her and Bandine, and that her long wait would soon be over. The cotillion came on a Saturday, two weeks after the meeting in town, and Claire and her father and brother all rode out together in the family buggy.

The gambrel roof and dormer windows of the Bandine house rose out of the brush like the topgallants of a ship, and the music of an orchestra from San Antonio was wafted out through a myriad windows blooming with yellow light. Bandine and Kit met them at the door. He had on a scissor-tail coat, bottle-green and tailored impeccably to his great-shouldered frame. His high white collar made the mahogany color of his face even darker. Kit's cheeks were filled with an excited glow, and Claire saw how her eyes immediately met Webb's, and clung there.

Claire removed her broché shawl, handing it to a servant. Her moire overskirt shimmered like silver, caught up at the sides with flouncy rosettes, and the neck of her green basque was cut sinfully low, leaving her bare shoulders to shine like alabaster in the light of a hundred candles. She saw Bandine's eyes grow wide, and he bowed low.

"Ma'am," he breathed. "This is enough to make me vote the straight Republican ticket."

Nadell chuckled in pleasure. Then the greetings began. Jerry Waggoner and Hammond Innes and countless others, all looking a little surprised to find Nadell here, yet showing him the utmost courtesy. It made Claire realize more than ever what respect her father had gained from both parties, and she knew a deep pride in him.

Finally Bandine pulled her away from the laughing crowd and she found herself spun onto the dance floor, where a dozen couples already whirled. It was something she had dreamed of for years, something she had thought would never come. There was a trembling excitement in her, like a schoolgirl on her first date. Bandine was staring intently into her face, his voice a little husky.

"You're beautiful, Claire."

She gave him a slow smile. "Mixing with that crowd in Austin has given you polish, Emery. A few years ago you would have compared me with a spotted pup under a yaller wagon."

He threw back his head to laugh at that. She had never seen him so gay. All the dark moods the brush had molded into him seemed driven away. But despite his laughter, his droll comments, she sensed a strange undercurrent in him. More than once, over the sumptuous dinner, she caught him watching her with a somber, wondering expression on his face. And as they danced again, there were half a dozen times when his laughter suddenly ceased, the same look returned to him, and he seemed about to say something, only to check himself.

It puzzled her, filled her with the sense of something about to happen, yet she did not know exactly what. It was late when they finally drifted onto the gallery. The far corner was shadowed and swimming with the scent of jasmine. They stood there in silence, watching the dancers still on the floor. Kit and Webb were swinging round and round, her eyes fixed worshipfully on his face.

"Kit seems quite smitten with your brother," Bandine said.

She sighed regretfully. "He has a way with women."

"Too much of a way. I wish you'd keep him away from my daughter, ma'am."

She stirred to look up at him and he turned quickly to her, contrition all over his face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to put it that way—"

"Never mind," she said, without anger. "I know what Webb is."

"He's not really bad, ma'am."

"No, he's merely weak. But a weak man with a flair for women can do cruel things to them."

"Then you'll help me. You'll keep him away from Kit. I think they've been seeing each other. I haven't said anything yet. I didn't want to spoil these first days at home. But I can't let it go on, I can't have her hurt."

"I'll do what I can, Emery. I know how much Kit means to you."

He bowed his head, the lines graven deep at the edges of his lips. "More than ever these last years. Sometimes it seems like Kit is the only one really close to me. It's like sunshine in a room when she's there."

"Nobody can know her without loving her, Emery. She's so exquisite, so like Catherine—" She broke off as he glanced sharply at her. Then she touched his arm. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Of course you didn't. I wasn't even thinking of that. It only shows—" He trailed off, frowning, hands opening and closing, as if trying to find the right words. "What I mean is—Catherine being on our minds like that. You said once there were so many things standing between us. Were you thinking of Catherine, too?"

He had turned to face her, the scents of tobacco and whisky on him a barely discernible fragrance that was somehow intensely masculine, stirring her deeply. She felt her face turning up toward his.

"Isn't it true, Emery?"

He caught her bare arms. His hands felt hot against her flesh. "I've been wanting to talk about it all evening. I can cuss a man out or talk every day about cattle. But when it comes to saying what I feel, it's so hard—"

She began to realize fully what he wanted to say, and felt a distinct shock. Could she expect so much so soon? It was difficult for her to speak.

"Maybe I can help you, Emery. We all know how much you loved Catherine. Maybe it would take you longer to get over her death than an ordinary man. But Dad told me time would heal it, sooner or later."

"After that kiss in the courthouse, I felt like I'd betrayed Catherine somehow."

"But now you know that's wrong. You've had enough time to see it in its true light. Catherine will always be a part of your life that no other woman can have. You still love her, Emery, and you always will. But not as a living woman. You still have another part of your life to fulfill, and you won't betray Catherine by doing it. She'd be the first one to tell you that."

"You're saying all the things I've tried to tell myself. It's been so mixed up in me. But it sounds right, now." He was speaking swiftly, intensely, as if her nearness this evening had at last released all the hungers and needs bottled up in him so long by the grip of Catherine's memory. "I should have seen that a long time ago. Maybe if I hadn't been so busy scrambling for

my kids we could have found out."

Her face was turned up to him, her eyes almost closed. "It's not too late, Emery."

His hands tightened on her arms till it hurt. He drew her against him and dipped his head to kiss her. A roaring filled her head. She lost all measurement of time. When he finally pulled away, a deep tremor ran through her body.

"This house has been too long without a woman, Claire. Will you come to it?" His voice shook a little. "Will you marry me?"

Her eyes were still closed, hiding the tears. "Yes," she said softly. "I'll marry you, Emery."

Chapter Seventeen

Man Alone

BANDINE and Claire made no announcement to the gathering that evening. She wanted him to be sure that it had not been just the spell of the night, that he was truly free of all the barriers that had stood between them. He thought about it those next days, but found no doubts in him. A few years ago, even a month ago, he would not have believed that two loves would exist in him. But now he was beginning to realize that many loves actually lay side by side in a man—the love of his friends, his children, his land, his woman—each related to the other, yet standing separate and distinct.

He finally could not wait longer, and rode over to ask Nadell formally for his daughter's hand. Nadell showed his wry smile and made some jokes about ruining the two-party system in the United States, and gave his wholehearted permission. Then Bandine rode back home and got Adah and Kit and Rusty into the library and broke the news. Kit rushed to him and threw her arms about his neck, kissing him and crying and laughing all at once.

"A man needs a woman," Adah beamed. "And there's none finer than Claire."

"We can make it a double wedding," Kit said.

"A double wedding?"

The smile left her face, she looked confused. "I'd meant to tell you, Dad. Webb and I—"

"Webb!"

His sharp tone jerked her head up. "Yes," she said. "We want to get married."

"Kit, you can't be serious, you're not sixteen—"

"You married mother when she was that old."

"But not Webb. You know what he is, Kit. A gambler, a drifter, a shiftless parasite."

"Dad, stop! He's Claire's brother. You ask our approval of her and turn around and talk like this about him. I won't listen to a lot of malicious lies."

"Kit, I forbid you—"

"You can't stop me, Dad. I'm going to marry Webb."

She ran out of the room and upstairs and they could hear her sobbing all the way. Bandine stood in a deep and helpless frustration, the pulse in his neck throbbing. Adah started to say something but when she saw the stony anger in his face she lifted a corner of her apron to tear-filled eyes and went back to the kitchen. Rusty remained in silent disapproval by the table.

"I suppose you're against me too."

"Nobody's against you, Dad. What Webb is doesn't particularly matter. If you'd only show Kit a little more understanding—"

"What kind of understanding? Let her marry the fool? Let her ruin her life? It was my fault not to nip it in the bud." The hurt and anger filled Bandine so roughly that he had no control over the way his words tumbled out. "And while we're on the subject, we'd better stop something else before it gets this bad. Seems like you're spending all your time in town now. Come home at dawn, sleep till noon."

He wheeled to the sideboard, pulled open a drawer, got a scrap of paper from it, and handed it to Rusty. "One of the I.O.U.'s you gave Samuels. He said he'd held it as long as he could. You want to gamble, you should at least learn how to play poker."

The boy flushed, staring doggedly down at the chit. Bandine paced across the room.

"I don't mind you hanging around that saloon or playing cards. But you can't spend all your time there. That's what happened to Webb. It's time you got out in the brush and learned your trade."

The boy's head sank lower. "You know it didn't do any good the last time I tried, Dad."

"You had bad luck. You're older, now—"

"And I want to be a lawyer more than ever."

"Why?" Bandine struck the table. "Your whole family comes out of the brush, Rusty. You belong there. The Double Bit is yours. Who's going to run it after I'm gone?"

The boy shook his head. "Please, Dad, we've gone over that so many times. I just know it's not for me. I'm no good at it and I don't want it."

"You don't know any such thing. You're as bad as Kit. You're too young to be so set on anything. Maybe I'm rushing you. In a year or so you'll be old enough to realize you belong to the cattle business. I'm willing to give you the rope, Rusty, but don't hang yourself with it. I won't let you turn out like Webb Nadell. If these chits keep coming in I'm going to drag you out by your heels every time I catch you in that saloon."

THOSE NEXT DAYS were bitterly frustrating for Bandine. Whenever he tried to talk with Kit about Webb, it ended in a battle, and finally she began locking herself in her room when he was home. Both Bandine and Claire tried to argue Webb out of it, but he gave them no satisfaction at all. It put a great blight on what Claire and Bandine had found together, and left Bandine in a black mood.

The Double Bit needed some new strings for fall beef roundup, so on the next horse day, Bandine rode into town with his foreman, George Remington. The corrals west of the river were full of horses and half the countryside had come in to trade and buy. Bandine took little interest in it, however, standing gloomily around the cookfires with a cup of coffee and letting Remington handle things.

The trading went on till after nightfall but finally Bandine grew so restless that he started for O'Hara's place, hoping a drink would relax him. The saloonkeeper was on a ladder, lighting the kerosene torches on the overhang of his building. They flared up and shot their ruddy illumination into the street, puddling it with miniature lakes of yellow fire.

The inside was already crowded, fogged with blue tobacco smoke, the long bar lined two-deep with drinkers. Bandine shouldered in between a pair of punchers and got his beer. His eyes lifted idly to the backbar mirror as he drank. The card tables on the other side of the room were reflected in the glass. At one, he saw Dan Holichek, Ewing Samuels, Webb Nadell, a hostler, and Rusty, playing stud. It filled him with such a shock of anger he almost gagged on his drink.

They had not seen him, and he moved down through the crowd till he could follow the play. Webb Nadell was dealing, with his back to Bandine. But his hands were visible, and Bandine found himself temporarily fascinated by the supple skill of his long pale fingers. Rusty was the obvious winner in the game, with a big pile of gold eagles and chips before him. Bandine could not quite understand a man with Webb's skill allowing a boy to take the play away from him so completely, and it made him suspicious.

The first cards were dealt, one to a man, face down all around. Webb dealt the second round. This one was face up, an ace for Rusty, a ten for Webb, miscellaneous small numbers for the other men. Being ace-high, Rusty put out a big bet. Webb raised him and Rusty took the bait, raising back. It was too rich for the others and they began dropping out. Finally it was only Rusty and Webb, raising each other till Rusty had put most of his winnings into the pot. Then he called, and Webb picked up the deck to deal the third card.

Bandine saw how he held it—three fingers on one side, the index finger on top, the thumb at the upper corner of the deck—and in that instant Bandine knew how he had set it up. For he had run into more than one center dealer in the deadfalls at Abilene. Webb had undoubtedly fed Rusty an ace for his down card. The boy, with two aces against Webb's ten that was showing, had naturally bet high. And now Webb was set for the killing.

Bandine moved away from the bar, in behind Webb, as the man dealt to Rusty. The boy's eyes were on the card, and he did not see Bandine. It was a seven, and Bandine saw disappointment take all the air out of Rusty. Before Webb could deal his own card, Bandine reached over and pinned his wrist to the table, the deck beneath his hand.

"A thousand dollars your card is a ten, Webb."

The noise of the room died suddenly. The men were used to the message of trouble, and Bandine's voice had carried it to the farthest corner. There was a strained tension to the line of Webb's neck, as he stared up at Bandine.

"You haven't got any right to horn in," Holichek said.

"Stay out of this," Bandine told him. "I just hope you ain't in on it. Is it a bet, Webb?"

The pain of Bandine's grip on Webb's wrist was showing in his face. Slowly he let his pinned fingers spread away from the deck, allowed Bandine to pull his hand off. Bandine turned the top card over. It was a ten.

Bandine turned Webb's hole card up. It was a ten also, giving him three of them. A sullen murmur ran through the crowd, as they began to see the implications.

Bandine leaned over and flipped Rusty's down card up. It was an ace. Bandine straightened up, knowing he

didn't have to say anything. Webb's three tens would have topped Rusty's pair of aces. It would have escaped notice in the ordinary run of the game, but now it was exposed, and there were enough men in the crowd who had seen a center dealer work before. The murmur began to take on a sound like the growl of an animal in its cage.

Bandine caught Webb by his lapels, pulling him out of the chair till he was standing on his toes. Webb's whole weight hung against Bandine's grip. His arms were slack and he made no move to struggle.

"If I find you in this town tomorrow," Bandine said, "I'll take a horsewhip to you."

The man did not answer. No expression showed on his face. It was as gray, as waxen, as a dead man's, with the eyes fixed emptily on Bandine. The sense of being unable to reach him angered Bandine even more, and he flung Webb from him. He staggered backward into one of the men sitting at another table, almost falling.

He dragged himself erect and stood with stooped shoulders, the hollows beneath his cheekbones turned cavernous by shadows cast from the overhead lights. A thin rancor brought a yellow tinge to his eyes, and then faded again, as he continued to stare at Bandine. With a curse Bandine turned to Rusty.

"Get up. We're getting out of here."

The boy did not move. His eyes were fixed on Bandine's face, smoldering and black. Bandine circled Samuels to catch the boy's arm, jerking him bodily out of the chair and shoving him toward the door. Rusty stumbled into the dense crowd at the bar. But Bandine was coming right behind, and the men spread to let the two of them through. Bandine followed Rusty out the door and they stopped momentarily on the walk.

"We're going home—"

The expression on the boy's face checked Bandine. All the planes of it seemed compressed, the lips pinched tight, the eyes squinted as if in pain.

"Damn you," the boy said. "Damn you—"

He broke off and whirled and ran off the sidewalk, tearing his bridle reins free from the rack and jumping aboard his horse. He backed it into the street and spurred it in a dead run out of town. Bandine watched him go, sick at his stomach and utterly helpless.

The sullen roar of the crowd grew from within the saloon, and Webb was pushed through the batwing doors. He stumbled and almost fell. He checked himself a moment, glancing at Bandine, with that thin rancor in his face, and then turned to walk down the street.

Bandine hardly saw him, still watching his son run out of town. Finally, however, he became aware of Holichek, standing just outside the door, and turned toward the man.

"What else did you expect?" Holichek said. "What would you do if somebody humiliated you like that, in front of the whole town?"

"Humiliated, hell! I just kept Rusty from losing his shirt. You all saw what Webb was doing to him. You know how a center dealer works."

"What's the difference what Webb was doing? You treated Rusty like a little kid. You showed him up before everybody. You couldn't have humiliated him more. You'll be lucky if he don't run out on you."

Bandine wheeled away, too miserable to feel anger at Holichek. He walked blindly down the street, needing some escape from the confused hurt in him.

It had been such a natural impulse to protect his son, to prove to him what kind of men he was befriending. Why couldn't the boy see that? Everything he did seemed wrong.

It was like an immense pressure building up in him. He suddenly felt that if he didn't find some escape he would come apart at the seams. He turned into the first saloon he reached. It went back to the old days, when he had come in after roundup, the pressures of loneliness and heartbreaking labor too great to be borne without some release.

The rest of that night was lost in alcoholic haze. He knew he broke a row of windows somewhere, shot somebody's mirror to shards, drove somebody's buggy and team through a fence of the horse corral, and ended up in an upstairs room of the inn. Then, out of the haze, there were shots, half a dozen of them, a whole gunful. And Poppa Lockwood running into the room and staring at the rungs Bandine had shot out of the foot of the iron bedstead. And Bandine, lying down and sticking his feet through the opening he had created.

"They must of made these beds for midgets. I'm tired of sleeping all folded up like a jackknife every time I come to town."

When he awoke the next noon he was sick and disgusted and it had not helped. He gave Poppa a blank check and asked him to pay all the damages he had caused in town. Then he rode home.

He got there late at night, and the lights in the dining-room gave him his first premonition. He found Adah in there, eyes red from crying.

"It's Kit," Adah told him. "She's run off to be married with Webb Nadell."

Chapter Eighteen

The Return

THAT autumn was the longest Claire Nadell had ever spent. She and Bandine had not planned to get married till late in the year, for the fence cutting was still a bitter issue, and the roundup would be a hard one, needing all Bandine's attention. But Kit's elopement had hit him hard, and even during the time Claire could see Bandine, it lay like a shadow over their happiness. Finally September came, and Bandine disappeared into the brush with his crews.

Claire knew that it was his way to throw himself into the labors in an effort to rid himself of the black mood Kit's loss had left. He came back for good in October, gaunt and tired and burned almost black by the sun.

They heard from Kit that month too. The postmark was from Julesburg but she said they were not living there, and would not tell her father where to find them, for fear he would come after her. This only enraged him more, and he was in no state to discuss the wedding for weeks. But finally they set the date for the fifteenth of November.

For a week the Nadell kitchen was like a beehive. The ovens were hot twenty-four hours a day, with the scent of baking bread and fruit cake and pound cake filling the whole lower floor. In the smoke-blackened fireplaces of the cavernous kitchen were spitted quarters of beef and whole pigs and rows of possums brought in by every neighbor boy for miles around.

The first frost came on the night of the fourteenth and Claire awoke on her

wedding day to look out on a land covered with a million Christmas trees. Pearl came up to help with her hair. Soon the guests began to arrive, and all during the time Pearl worked at the fingerpuffs, the jingle of bits and stamp of horses floated up through the windows. Then came the dress.

The bustles which had replaced hoops in the early seventies were growing smaller each year, and Pearl spent an interminable time draping the overskirt to her satisfaction. At last she stepped away, black, amplitudinous, grinning triumphantly at the shimmering sheath of the satin bodice, clinging so tightly to the fullness of Claire's upper body.

"Hard to tell which is snowier, honey, you or that satin."

Claire smiled nervously, then wheeled to stare out at the lines of buggies and hacks at the hitching-rings. "Has Emery come yet?"

Pearl giggled. "You asked me that a dozen times already. He done come an hour ago. Down there drinking and making jokes with your father. And just as scared as you."

There was a furtive knock on the door and Pearl opened it a crack. It was Leander, her gawky son, eyes wide and frightened in his black face.

"It's Mistah Webb," he said. "He come up the back way. He wants to see you in his room."

Claire's heart seemed to stop. For a moment her mind was completely blank with shock. Then, unwilling to speculate on why he should come this way, she gathered up her skirt and followed Pearl. Webb would have been seen from below if he had come to Claire's room. It must have been why he had stopped at his room, around the turn in the hall. The same thing made Pearl keep her bulk between the balcony rail and Claire, so that the groom would have no chance of seeing his bride too soon.

Webb was pacing in front of the windows when Pearl opened the door. His face was white and pinched about the mouth, his clothes rumpled and travel stained. Pearl stayed outside, and Claire closed the door. Her brother walked swiftly to her, catching her hands.

"Honey, this is a terrible way to arrive for your wedding—"

"Webb, what's happened?"

He let her go, wheeled around, walking back to the window. He licked his lips, rubbed his hands together, glared out through the leaded glass.

"I need your help, Sis. I was afraid to come back. But I'm dead broke and I couldn't get any farther—"

"Why should you be afraid to come back?" She walked to him, dropping her skirts, clutching his arm. "Webb, what are you trying to say. Where's Kit?"

He put his hands on the windowsill, gripping it so tightly the knuckles shone translucently through the pale flesh. A sobbing sound racked his voice.

"Kit—Kit—she's dead—"

He broke off, head bowed deeply. Claire was so stunned she could not react in any way. All the blood drained from her cheeks, leaving them white as her dress. Webb shut his eyes and bit his lips. Then, with a sudden wheeling motion he went over to the bed and sat down, head dropped into his hands.

"I couldn't help it, Sis. She was sick. It was so cold up there. She was sick and I'd lost my job and we had a fight."

She stared at him a long time, before she could bring the words out. "Sick with what?"

He shook his head savagely from side to side. "I don't know. The doctor said pneumonia, when I saw him again—"

"Again? Do you mean you left her?"

"I didn't know how bad it was, Claire, I wouldn't have done it for the world—"

She walked swiftly to him and grasped his shoulders, shaking him. "Webb, what are you saying? Do you mean you left her while she was sick?"

He pulled her hands off and held them in his own, looking up at her with an intense agitation in his pale face. "Claire, I didn't mean it, you've got to believe me. I wouldn't have done it for the world—"

The look on her face stopped him. She pulled away from him. He caught at her hands again, stumbling to his feet. Sweat had broken out on his sallow forehead, giving it a greasy shine. His words became slurred, his voice shrill with plea.

"Sis, please, I didn't know this was your wedding day. I had no idea Emery would be here. You'll tell him about Kit. I can't. He'd kill me. You know he would. Just a little money, Sis. I wouldn't have done it for the world, you know I wouldn't. I can get out the back way—"

"Then you'd better go."

His eyes were blank. "But you've got to help me."

"I've been helping you all my life, Webb." Her voice had a dead sound. "I've lied to Dad for you, perpetuated your little illusions, forgiven you the countless people you've hurt, overlooked your meanness and your shallowness. I'll never do it again. When you leave this house, it will be for the last time."

He tried to catch at her hands again, but checked himself at the sound of voices from outside. The stairway was shaking to the heavy pound of feet; someone called Claire's name.

"It's Emery," she said. "Someone must have told him."

Webb went white. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. In that last instant the habits and ties of a lifetime asserted themselves, and Claire knew that despite her resolve to be finished with Webb, she had to prevent Bandine from finding him here. She knew Bandine's rage, knew him quite capable of killing Webb if he found this out, and could not deliberately expose her brother to that, even now.

She turned and opened the door and stepped out, closing it behind her. Bandine was at the head of the stairs. He halted a moment, staring blankly at her, face flushed with the exertion of running upstairs. Then he called:

"Samuels said he saw Webb. Did he bring Kit?"

She began to walk down the balcony. "Webb's already left, Emery."

He started toward her, frowning at the expression on her face. She knew it was still pale and set; she couldn't help that. He began to walk toward her.

"Claire, you're lying to me. Why did you stay in his room if he's left?"

He had reached her and she caught his arm, trying gently to turn him. "Come to my room, Emery?"

He refused to be wheeled aside. "Webb's still in his room, isn't he? Something's happened. I can see it in your face. What's he hiding for?" He abruptly quit trying to get around her, as the thought struck him. He caught her arms. His voice shook as he spoke. "Is it Kit?"

The pain of his grip was so great

that she fought involuntarily to twist free. "Emery, please—"

"Is she sick? Did he leave her somewhere?"

"Emery, you're hurting me—"

He released her just as suddenly as he had grasped her. He stepped back. His cheeks were a putty color, his eyes looked sunken and blank with shock. She knew it was what her face must have looked like when she first heard about Kit.

"She's dead," he said. His voice was painfully strained, barely audible. "I can see it in your face. Webb wouldn't be afraid to see me for any other reason. Kit's dead."

With one hand she was holding her throbbing right arm. "Emery, if you'll just come to my room—"

He made an inarticulate sound and tried to rush by her. She caught at him, almost torn off balance by his rush, hanging on him with all her weight.

"He killed her," Bandine said hoarsely. "He wouldn't be hiding for any other reason—"

"Emery, don't go in there—"

"I'll kill him, Claire. Let me go. I swear I'll kill him—"

She saw the terrible, wounded rage turning his eyes blank, and knew he could not be stopped once he got his hands on Webb. She threw all her weight against him in her struggle to stop him. He tried to twist her free and it swung him around into the bannister. She heard the crash of breaking wood as his great weight fell heavily into the flimsy rail. It broke and his body pitched over into the sea of upturned faces below. Claire was almost pulled with him, but caught the remains of the bannister in the last instant. She had a dizzy glimpse of his body sprawled on the floor below.

As she turned to run downstairs, she saw Webb dart from his room. He stopped at the broken bannister, looking down at Bandine. Then he wheeled and ran for the back stairs.

Claire hurried down to the first floor, elbowing through the people packed around Bandine. They had helped him to a sitting position against the wall. Pain squinted his eyes, and his face was beaded with sweat. The Major and a couple of other men were trying to lift him.

"Get him on the couch—"

Bandine groaned in pain, fighting off their pawing hands. "Don't move me," he said. "She's broke my leg all to hell."

Chapter Nineteen

"How Can I Face Them?"

THE winter of 1877 was the worst Spanish Crossing had known in twenty years. It was the year of the big drift. Sleet came in November, snow in December. And ice in January, lying like a sheet over the ground, covering the graze for hundreds of miles. In their blind search for warmth and grass, the cattle began to drift. They came like the buffalo, from as far north as Oklahoma and Kansas, driven before the blizzards in masses so vast no man could estimate their numbers. They pushed into Frio County and drove the local herds before them, traveling inevitably southward.

A drift fence might have stopped them, but a year of fence cutting lay before this winter, and there were few whole fences standing. The riders could not turn them back, for there were too

many, and they were being driven by a herd instinct as old as time.

And when it was over, and the crews from Frio County had to ride as far south as the Gulf coast to cut their cattle out of the herds that had drifted there, they found pitifully few left under their brand. For thousands had been trampled to death or had frozen or had starved on the march. It was a blow that brought many of the big operators to their knees. But it was a boon to the Holichek brothers.

Big Bob swept into town on one of his flying visits that March, with the usual telegram ahead of time to insure a welcoming committee. There was the invariable round of cigars, the sly implications of big things at Austin, the drink left half-finished at the bar—then Dan was closeted upstairs with his brother. Bob was getting a tremendous paunch, and wheezed with the effort of slightest movement.

"Why don't you get some decent heat in this hole? Hasn't changed in twenty years." He stamped officiously around the room, blowing on his hands to warm them. He then asked about Bandine.

Lighting the cast-iron stove, Holichek told Bob that the winter had hit Bandine even worse than the others. His broken leg had kept him from joining his crews in their attempts to stop the drifts.

Bob asked about the marriage, saying they would lose everything if Bandine became Nadell's son-in-law. Holichek said Bandine had not seen Claire since the ill-fated wedding day. Bob chuckled, tramping to the stove, lifting up his coattails to warm his hams.

"I guess not," he said. "I guess Bandine couldn't marry the girl when her brother killed his daughter. Not Bandine." He shook his head, grinning slyly. "And Nadell?"

"He's agreed to run on our ticket. I've convinced him we'll back him on everything he asks."

Bob chuckled triumphantly. "You're almost as good a liar as me, Dan. Nadell's name will have us in power again for sure. Might even run him for governor next year." He frowned, dropping the coattails. "Only one thing standing in our way, then. What about this rumor that the big operators are putting Bandine up for State Senator?"

Holichek told him it was more than a rumor. One more winter like this could ruin Bandine and the other big men. The only thing that would save them was fences to stop the cattle from drifting. But they couldn't keep barbed wire up with the fence cutters at work. The big operators had to stop the fence cutting this year or they were through. And with Bandine in the Senate and Waggoner in the lower house, they could really push through the fence-cutting bill. Nadell wouldn't stand much chance either, if Bandine ran against him. Big Bob shook his head, saying that mustn't happen.

"It won't," Holichek said. "You know how Bandine feels about his kids. He's already lost one. He'd sell his soul to keep Rusty. I can set it up so that if Bandine runs for Senator, he'll lose his son for good. Do you think he'll run, under those circumstances?"

Big Bob stared at his brother, understanding dawning slowly in his sly, pouched eyes. Then he began to chuckle. It grew to laughter, great wheezing laughter that filled the room. He sounded like a windsucker every time he drew in a breath and his cheeks puffed out and grew red and a pattern of purple whisky veins appeared in his

bulbous nose.

He suddenly seemed very ugly to Holichek, ugly and bloated and corrupt. Holichek turned and walked to the window, staring through the gathering steam and the dust and the fly specks at the street below.

He was remembering that first meeting with Rusty, when he had been on his way to the gathering of the little operators—remembering that moment of rapport, when he had touched the boy. Remembering how it had disgusted him to think of using the kid. Why hadn't he kept that feeling? Why had he let himself drift into this, cultivating the boy, using the things that stood between Rusty and his father?

"Bob," he said. "Give me five thousand dollars."

Big Bob almost choked on his laughter. "What?"

"I've been your boy, I've done all your grimy little jobs, you wouldn't have Spanish Crossing without me—"

"What would you do with that much?"

"Send Rusty to college. He wants to be a lawyer, it's the big dream of his life. He wants to do something for those poor fools out in the brush, wants to stop all this damn fighting about nothing. He could, too, Bob. I've done a lot of dirty things, but I can't use a son against his father that way."

"You damn fool!" Big Bob said. It stopped Holichek. Bob stamped over and stood before him, breathing stertorously, frowning intensely at him. Finally he spoke, disgustedly. "You know why you won't ever amount to anything, Dan?"

"That hasn't got anything—"

"You're soft." Big Bob wheeled to tramp across the room, pulling a cigar from his coat. "You haven't got a pure gut in your body. You got a dozen irons in the fire, always something big going. But you never quite make it pan out, do you? Because you're little, Dan. You're small-time."

Holichek's swarthy cheeks grew red, his black eyes began to dance. Big Bob stopped to pare off the end of his cigar with his penknife, chuckling maliciously.

"You hate that, don't you? When I'm not around you think you're the big frog here. You stand around with that cigar in your mouth and tell them how you elected Hayes and E. J. Davis and they lick your boots like it was candy. It's the breath of life to you."

Bob fired up his cigar, talking between puffs. "But deep down in your heart—you know—this is just a little puddle. And you're just a little frog. You know it whenever I come back. It kills you to hear them call me Big Bob, doesn't it? You're Little Dan, then. You hate my guts for it. You know you'll never be anything more than a tinhorn boss of a bunch of county stooges. You haven't got the guts to be anything else—"

"Guts?" Holichek said hotly. "What do you know about guts? You've never been able to stop Bandine. If he's going to be pulled down, I'll do it."

"You'll never make it, little brother."

"I will. And you'll pay a price for it this time. Not any penny-ante five thousand dollars. You're going to find a spot at the capitol for me. A nice juicy plum—"

"What if I agree? There's a spot in the attorney general's office at Austin. You pull strings, you get big gravy."

It stopped Holichek. He was breathing heavily. He knew exactly what Big Bob had done to him, but he couldn't help it.

He said, "If I talked, even after Bandine was ruined, it would pull the whole thing down on you."

"Don't worry about me going back on my word," Big Bob said.

Holichek turned and walked back to the window, staring out. Big Bob wreathed himself in fragrant smoke, all affability and portly charm again.

"And all that sentiment about the boy," he said. "It's over?"

It was a long time before Holichek roused himself to answer. His voice had a dull sound. "I just had to have my moment," he said. "Like getting dirty. Once in a while you got to wash, even though you know you'll get dirty again, just for your own self-respect."

"Don't kid me. Who has self-respect?"

"Yeah," Holichek said. "Who has self-respect?"

IT WAS A TERRIBLE YEAR for Bandine. His leg had been broken in two places and took months to heal, confining him to the house long into the spring. The doctor said it was because he had no will to get well. Kit's death seemed to have stunned him, leaving a bowed husk of a man who sat most of the day in the library, his leg propped up on a stool, staring blankly before him.

He really had no clear picture of what had happened to him. He only knew there was a sick pain, deep inside him, that nothing would drive out. He only knew that all desire for life seemed drained from him. He had no hunger, no want of people, his mind was utterly closed off from all the usual needs. Neither Adam nor Rusty could reach him. He wouldn't see Claire, and she knew what must be going on inside him, and didn't force herself upon him. She remembered what time had done in the case of Catherine, and clung to the hope that it would be her ally now.

The spring dragged on, and his leg finally healed enough for him to hobble around. He began to take a listless interest in the ordinary things of life, put some of his weight back on, found some of the old vitality returning. By fall, he was riding, and joined the roundup. He could do no roping or heavy brushpopping, and spent most of his time in camp with the branding.

Waggoner rode out to tell him that the state Democratic chairman, Guthrie, was in Spanish Crossing. He would only be there one more day. They could hold up their plans no longer, and if Bandine would not agree to run for Senator, they would have to throw it to Mead. He was a weaker man, and they didn't have too much hope of Mead's defeating Nadell at the polls. But Big Bob's bunch was already starting their campaign, and the Democrats could wait no longer.

Waggoner wanted Bandine to return with him this afternoon, but Bandine was still reluctant. He found himself unable to make a quick decision on anything, and thought it was Kit's death still fogging his mind. He asked Waggoner to give him more time. The man rose from the saddle he had used as a seat.

"All right, Emery. If you come in tomorrow we'll know you've decided to run. If you don't show up, we'll assume you've decided not to."

As Waggoner mounted, and turned to go, Bandine saw another rider at the edge of the thickets. It was Rusty, his town clothes filmed with dust and scarred by the brush. He greeted Waggoner as the man left, and then rode on in.

"This is the last place I'd look for you," Bandine said. "What brings you out?"

"Riding this way," Rusty said vaguely. "Thought I'd drop in and see how roundup was coming."

"Not much left to round up, after the big drift," Bandine said. "Light down and have some coffee."

Bandine watched him dismount. The boy was almost eighteen now, already six feet tall, losing the bony awkwardness that had marked his adolescence. He squatted down and reached for the pot. Bandine knew a sudden stabbing need for Rusty's companionship.

"Seems like a long time since I've really seen you, jigger. I guess I been going around in a fog ever since Kit died. I guess I'm just beginning to pull out of it."

"You were a long way off," Rusty said, pouring the coffee. "None of us could reach you." He stood up, handing a cup to Bandine. He frowned, and then spoke with distinct effort. "Dad, I saw Claire the other day. Don't you think you could—"

He broke off as Bandine's head jerked up, eyes filled with a mingled rage and pain. Then Bandine turned around, took a couple of limping steps away from the fire, gripping the tin cup tightly, without even feeling the burning heat of it.

"Dad, it wasn't Claire's fault," Rusty said. "She had no control over what Webb did. I loved Kit as much as you did, but I can't see this. You have no right to go on punishing Claire for something she couldn't control—"

"Punishing Claire?" It seemed torn from Bandine. "What do you think I've been going through? I've tried, Rusty. Believe me, I've tried. I've told myself she isn't to blame. But Webb was her brother, Rusty. He left Kit, stranded, without money, coming down with pneumonia. He might as well of taken a gun to her. I saw Nadell in town last week. I started shaking all over. I broke out in a cold sweat. I got sick to my stomach. It was his son, and her brother. How can I face any of them, knowing that?"

He stopped, with the last light of day giving a gray tinge to the misery of his face, dimly highlighting the peaks of his prominent cheekbones and dropping pale shadows into the gaunt hollows beneath them. All his life he had been brought up against the blind depths of his own feelings—his intense pride, his anger, his love of his children that bordered on an obsession—and he knew now that no matter what his mind told him, he was helpless before this sick rejection of anything connected with Webb Nadell. He shook his head, like some ringy bull shaking the brush out of its horns, and turned back to Rusty.

"Let's not spoil today with it. You're all I have left now, Rusty. I don't want to fight with you any more. It's like you say, I've been away. And if I run for Senator I may be away again—"

"Is that what Waggoner was here for?"

"Yes. I've got to decide tomorrow."

"That's what he meant when he said

they'd know you'd decided to run if they saw you in town tomorrow. And if you get elected you'll put through the fence-cutting bill. And if it's made a felony, Santero's appeal won't have a chance—"

"That's one of the things that's held me back. But Waggoner says that after the bill is passed, we can get Santero off on a technicality. He was involved in that fence cutting before it was made a felony."

"What if he can't get Santero off?"

Bandine shook his head in angry confusion. "But he can. He told me so."

"But what if he can't? You refuse to face it, don't you? I've been up to see Santero at Huntsville, Dad. You know how old he is. He can't take this. If he doesn't get that appeal he won't live another year. He's a broken man. You're taking a chance on Waggoner's word when it might mean Santero's life—"

"You're twisting this all around," Bandine snapped. "Waggoner knows how I feel about Santero. He wouldn't take a chance on the old man. We're up against the wall, jigger. If fence cutting isn't made a felony this year we won't have a thing to fight with. We'll be through—"

"How many times have I heard that before?"

"And each time it was true. Only now a hundred times more so—"

"So it boils down to the fact that you'll sacrifice Santero to save yourself."

"Not myself, jigger, can't you see that?"

"You're talking about doing it all for me again. I couldn't live in your house if it was bought with Santero's suffering, Dad. If you go into town tomorrow, I'm leaving for good!"

Chapter Twenty

Fifteen Years in the Making

DAN HOLICHEK usually rose about ten in the morning, washed in his hotel room, trimmed his spade beard, and ate at the inn. All during breakfast, he was aware of something unusual stirring the town. Riders were constantly trotting past the inn, kicking up so much dust that it filtered inside and started Holichek coughing over his last cup of coffee. He paid Poppa Lockwood and went outside for his morning cigar. Over the rooftop of the Martinez house, on the high land west of town, the old Spanish jail was visible. The horsemen were gathering there, with John Friar in their midst, his sheriff's badge winking in the bright sunlight.

While Holichek pared his cigar, O'Hara came from his saloon to observe the unusual movement through Cabildo. As Holichek started across the street, Harry Geddings came from the door of the cheap hotel where he roomed, hobbling toward First Street where he could turn up to join the group before the jail. He was not the same man he had been before the bullet crippled him out in the brush. He had lost twenty pounds and his hair was snow-white. His look of thick-bodied competence was gone, he stood stooped and hollow-chested, his face seamed with bitterness. He saw Holichek coming and stopped by O'Hara, speaking with a trembling rancor in his voice.

"You'll see the end of it now, Holichek. Friar's got fifty men in that posse. He'll have more when Innes and the others join him with their crews. Why

don't you go out and join the fence cutters now?"

"Geddings," Holichek said mildly, "you know I never had anything to do with the fence cutters. What's all the fuss about?"

Geddings glared at him with squinted, disbelieving eyes, then spat it out. "You know's well as I. If Bandine reaches the Senate, fence cutting is certain to be made a felony. Everybody knows that if he shows up here today he means to run for office. The fence cutters are just waiting for that. The minute he hits town they claim they'll pull down every inch of wire in a hundred miles. But they won't even get started. Friar'll be out there waiting for 'em. One move toward a fence and this county will go up in smoke. I just wish I could be out there with Friar. I just wish I could catch that Santero cutting a fence once more."

He spat at the curb, gripping his cane till his knuckles looked like shiny knobs. Then he wheeled and hobbled on down the street. Holichek turned to O'Hara, black brows raised.

"Looks like a showdown."

"It does," O'Hara said, "at that."

Holichek smiled blandly at him. He felt a distaste, in O'Hara, felt that the man had evaluated him a long time ago, and disliked what he had found. It was sort of a tacit, armed truce between them, for O'Hara had maintained a professional neutrality in this town for twenty years, which neither wars nor politics could affect, and this was merely another eddy in the stream for him. His Irish face was completely enigmatic as he went back inside.

Holichek glanced idly down the street to see that Friar's men were not the only ones in town. Billy Graves idled with a couple of Mexicans in front of the stables, their dark faces intent on the street, and farther down were more men out of the brush, standing by a water trough. The fence cutters would know as soon as Bandine went up to see Guthrie.

Holichek went into the saloon and found Henry Tevis at the front end of the bar with a beer. He halted there, asking:

"Rusty all primed?"

Tevis glanced covertly toward the rear, where Rusty and Garrison and Revere sat at a deal table. "He come in last night, all upset after another fight with his dad. I think he's ready for you now, Dan."

Holichek walked back and slid in beside Rusty. The boy's clothes were rumpled and caked with dust, his face white and pinched around the lips.

"How's everything?" Holichek asked. "Your dad going to run?"

Rusty's voice sounded strained. "I told him I'd leave him if he did."

Holichek studied the burning intensity of the boy's eyes, the square and stubborn shape of his underlip, realizing that this was the culmination toward which he had been working so long. It had been no great problem to cultivate Rusty, through the years. It had been merely a matter of following the natural drift of things.

Holichek had none of the inarticulateness which so often blocked Bandine off from reaching Rusty. Talk was his greatest commodity. He had seen the needs in the boy, had been able to draw him out, touching his interests, fulfilling them. He had spent many hours over his law books with Rusty, had gone fishing with him, had included him as an equal in the group at the saloon, until it was natural for Rusty to identify himself closely with them.

And since so many of them were allied with the brushpoppers, it had taken little effort to push Rusty one step further into the camp of the fence cutters. It had been a natural result of the things already shaping the boy's life—his friendship for Santero going so far back, the gulf between him and his father growing steadily broader.

As he studied Rusty, Holichek felt a vague resurgence of the self-disgust he had known the last time with Big Bob. But there were stronger needs at work in him now. The thought of Austin had been constantly in his mind, driving him, and he had refused to let the sentiment over Rusty reach him fully again.

"Where would you go," he asked Rusty, "if you left your father?"

"To us," Revere said. "Where else?"

"You mean in this fence cutting?" Holichek asked him.

"That's right," Revere said. "The fences are what give the big men power. Why else would they fight so hard to keep them? Cut the fences and we destroy the power. Do that and they won't be able to put Bandine in the senate. Fence cutting will not become a felony, and Santero's appeal will go through. You told us that yourself."

"Did I?" mused Holichek. "It sounds logical." He studied his cigar. "They gathering at Santero's?"

"Mexican Thickets."

Holichek glanced at Rusty. "And you ride with them?"

Rusty nodded miserably. "If Dad comes to town, I will. He's got to be stopped some way, Dan."

Before Holichek answered, Billy Graves appeared at the door, calling softly. Holichek knew what it was, and rose and went quickly to the door, pushing through. He heard Rusty's chair scrape back, heard the boy's boots against the floor.

The horseman was coming alone from the south end of Cabildo, a towering figure in the saddle, the sun flaming on the shaggy edges of his hair beneath his white Stetson. Holichek turned to Rusty, who now stood at his side.

"You'd better let him see you, kid. It's your last chance."

Rusty drew in a long breath, moved slowly across the sidewalk and into the street. Bandine saw him, and his great frame straightened in the saddle. But he did not stop his horse till it was opposite Rusty. In the hot, cottony silence of noon, father and son stared at each other without speaking. Finally, Rusty said:

"You're going to run?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't. You better go on home."

It took a long time for Rusty's answer to come. "I told you how that was yesterday, Dad. And it's not only me. Every fence cutter in the brush is waiting. If you go through with this, there won't be a fence left standing in the whole county."

"I've already been told that," Bandine said in a thick voice. "They won't stop me with those kind of threats. I passed Friar and his whole posse on the road. If the fence cutters cut one wire they'll be in the middle of a war."

"If they are, I'll be with them."

Holichek saw the color leave Bandine's cheeks, till they had a putty hue in the bright light. "Don't talk like a fool," he said. "Friar and Innes are out for blood. Whoever doesn't get killed in the fight will find himself up at Huntsville with Santero. You're not going to get mixed up in it. Now stop talking like a fool kid and go on home."

"When will you stop thinking of me

as a kid?" The boy's voice broke. "How can I show you I mean what I say? I won't see you sacrifice Santero for the Double Bit, Dad. If I have to join the fence cutters to stop you, I will."

Holichek saw Bandine's eyes grow blank with rage. He knew that this was the moment. Bandine must finally realize that he would lose his son if he went on. He wouldn't sacrifice the boy to that.

Holichek took his cigar from his mouth, waiting for Bandine to speak. But Bandine only stared at Rusty, that blankness in his eyes, that dead-white look on his face. Then, with a sound of rage, he raked his huge Mexican spurs across his horse's flanks, jolting it into a gallop that took him in a swirling cloud of dust to the hotel where Guthrie was staying. Without looking back, he pulled up his horse and swung off, dropping the reins across the rack, and disappeared through the door.

Holichek's whole expectancy had been reversed so suddenly that it did not register for a moment. His mind blank with shock, he watched Rusty standing in the street for what seemed an eternity, staring after his father. Then the boy came back to his horse. As if from a great distance, Holichek saw the utter misery in his face.

One by one, Garrison and Tevis and Concho passed Holichek, each glancing at his blank face. Farther down the street, other men were mounting. Rusty climbed into his saddle, sent one last despairing glance at the hotel, then wheeled his horse and kicked it into a dead run out of town.

Only then did Holichek's defeat begin to reach him. He dropped his cigar, staring emptily at it on the splintered planking of the sidewalk. He began to feel sick to his stomach.

THE TROWBRIDGE CASE had been canceled that morning, and it left nothing on Nadell's docket till afternoon. He had slept late and had eaten breakfast about eleven. He knew the whole town was waiting to see if Bandine would come in, and was at the inn door when the man appeared. He had seen the meeting between father and son in the street, had seen Rusty leave with Garrison and Tevis and the others. As the dust of their running horses settled back into the street, he started across toward O'Hara's cantina. He knew that Holichek was inside and wanted to talk with the man, feeling that there was something about this he did not yet understand fully.

He was halfway across when he saw Bandine emerge from the hotel, and start up toward O'Hara's. He still limped noticeably. Knowing how the man felt, Nadell had the impulse to turn back to the inn. But Bandine had already seen him. The expression on the man's face was not what Nadell had met in their other chance meetings since Kit's death. There was no anger, no hurt, no blame in his eyes. Only a lost, searching look that made Nadell halt, then go on to wait for the man at the curb. As Bandine approached, Nadell asked quietly:

"Are you going to be my opposition, now?"

Bandine halted by one of the peeled cottonwood supports, the top of his Stetson almost touching the overhang. He frowned blankly at Nadell for a moment, a slack look to his face. Then he said, "I didn't sign with Guthrie."

It was a complete surprise to Nadell. He knew Bandine and the other big operators fully expected ruin if the fence bill was not passed this year.

"What on earth happened?"

Bandine looked down at the walk. "Adah told me once, a long time ago, that I'd lose my kids if I didn't stop this scramble to get big. She was right, Major. I guess I didn't realize that till just now. But it was more than my scramble losing them. It was the things inside me. I get awful mad sometimes, don't I?"

Nadell nodded sober agreement. "You do."

"And pride. I got so much pride it chokes me. Those are the things that always spoiled it, with Rusty. It's what happened just now. I got so mad at him I couldn't talk. My own son, threatening to turn on me that way. It fair burned me up. I didn't realize how wrong I was till I started up those stairs to Guthrie's room. Then everything started coming back. All the times I'd lost Rusty and Kit, all the little things and big things. Like that time in town when I fought with Holichek and the Davis police dragged me in. I should have known Holichek was just goading me. If I hadn't let him do it I could of bought the ponies for the kids like I promised. And if I hadn't gotten mad at Kit and driven her away, she might be alive right now."

"You mustn't blame yourself for that."

Bandine did not seem to hear him. He was staring beyond Nadell now. "Waggoner said he could get Santero off. But Rusty said that Waggoner might be wrong. And Rusty was right. That's what came to me, going up those stairs. Santero's an old man, a broken man. If he has to stay at Huntsville, it'll kill him, just like Rusty said. I can't take that chance. I hold Santero's life in my hands, just like I held Kit's, and I can't sacrifice him for all the money or all the beef in the world. If I hadn't been so damn mad and so damn proud and so crazy to get big, I would have seen that long before this."

He looked at Nadell, as if seeking confirmation, then said, "I've got to go home and tell Rusty that, Major."

"I don't think he rode home, Emery. He went out with Garrison and Tevis and those others."

Bandine's eyes went blank. Then he let out his breath in a great gust. "You're crazy. He wouldn't go with them. That was just wild kid talk. He wouldn't really turn on me that way—"

"You've faced all the rest, why can't you face this? Rusty is grown up. If he's going to join the fence cutters he must think this is the only way to stop you."

Bandine frowned at Nadell, until it reached him fully, and then said, all in a burst, "Which way did they go, where are they gathering?"

"I don't know, Emery—"

A wild look crossed Bandine's face. He wheeled to stare at the saloon door. Then, with an inarticulate sound of rage, he lunged through the batwings. Nadell followed him and saw him heading through the dim room toward Holichek, who sat at the farthest table in the room.

Holichek's head raised listlessly. Nadell thought he had never seen such defeat in any man's face. Holichek's mouth was slack with it, his eyes were glazed and blank. He seemed to dredge up surprise with great effort. Bandine reached the table and put his palms flat on the top, leaning all his weight onto them.

"Holichek," he said. "Where are those fence cutters gathering?"

Some of the wildness in Bandine's face reached Holichek, and his whole broad frame pressed itself against the

chair back. "I don't know," he said.

"You do know. Garrison's your man and he's been a mavericker and a fence cutter for years. You've been hand in glove with every attempt to cut the big operators down."

Holichek's chair scraped shrilly against the floor, as he slid it back. "Bandine, you're crazy—"

Bandine took his palms off the table and began to circle it. "Those fence cutters are going to start a war out there, Holichek. If Rusty don't get killed in it he'll be sent to Huntsville with all the rest. I couldn't stop that any more than I could stop Santero being sent there. You've been building Rusty up to this for a long time. Did you think I was blind? You've been cultivating him and poisoning his mind and working him toward this day for years. You knew I couldn't sacrifice Rusty."

Bandine stopped, by Holichek's chair. The other man had backed against the wall. All the blood was drained from his swarthy cheeks, leaving them sallow, making his eyes seem even blacker. But there was no fear in them. Only a watchful, predatory waiting.

Nadell knew why the man could not tell. If he revealed the fence cutters' gathering-place now they would look upon it as a betrayal, and he would lose their friendship for good.

Bandine's voice lowered, till it was barely audible to Nadell. "Are you going to tell me, Holichek?"

"I don't know, Bandine."

Without a sound, Bandine threw himself at the man. Holichek flipped his coattail up and tried to draw his gun. But Bandine's rush carried him into the man before Holichek could get the weapon free. It smashed Holichek against the wall so hard the whole building shuddered.

Nadell called to them and started forward in an impulse to stop it. But O'Hara had come around the bar and he grabbed Nadell's arm.

"Don't get in there, Major. You'll only get hurt. This has been coming for fifteen years, and Hood's own brigade couldn't stop it."

Holding Holichek against the wall, Bandine twisted his gun arm till Holichek had to drop the weapon with a hoarse sound of pain. Then Bandine tried to release one of his hands to hit Holichek. It gave the other man enough freedom to lunge into Bandine before he could strike. It knocked Bandine backward, still holding onto Holichek's arm with one hand, pulling Holichek with him as they staggered away from the wall and into a table.

It skidded from beneath Bandine and he fell, pulling Holichek down too. It broke his hold, however, and Holichek fell away from him, sprawling flat. Holichek rolled over and tried to scramble erect and get away from Bandine at the same time. Bandine lunged after him from one knee, catching his coat.

The coat ripped down the back and Holichek's impetus pulled him out of half of it, leaving the empty piece of garment in Bandine's hand. The sudden release sent Holichek staggering until he came against a table. Dropping the coat, Bandine plunged after him.

Holichek wheeled around, setting himself, meeting Bandine with a blow to the belly. Bandine took it with a sick grunt and went on into Holichek, smashing him in the face. It bent Holichek violently back over the table. Bandine grabbed him and held him there, hitting him across the face again, shouting at him.

"Where is Rusty, Holichek?"

Holichek rolled to the side and kicked Bandine in the bad leg. Nadell saw pain contort Bandine's face, as his leg went from beneath him, and he fell heavily. Breathing gustily, blood dripping from his black beard, Holichek swung around to grab a near-by chair. Bandine was trying to get up and had gained his hands and knees when Holichek wheeled back and smashed the chair down on his head. It brought an outraged shout from Nadell.

The chair shattered across Bandine's back and head, leaving only a stout rear leg in Holichek's hand. As he shifted to bring this lethal club down on Bandine's head again, Bandine twisted around dazedly, gaining one knee and throwing an arm up to block the blow.

Nadell gasped at the sickening sound of wood striking flesh and bone. It knocked Bandine back down, but gave him a chance to grab the club before Holichek could recover, giving a desperate jerk. Holichek did not let go soon enough and it pulled him bodily into Bandine, flipping him over the man to sprawl heavily on the floor.

Still stunned from the blow with the chair, Bandine crawled blindly to the bar. He got his hands on the mahogany top and pulled himself to his feet. Then he turned around, hooking his elbows over the edge of the bar, and hung there, sucking in great breaths, waiting for Holichek to rise.

Holichek had already rolled over, shaking his head. He got to his hands and knees, sending one blank look around for his club. Then his eyes reached Bandine. He crouched there a moment, staring balefully at the man, the breath passing gustily in and out of his broad chest. Then he got to one knee and started backing up so that he would be out of Bandine's reach when he rose.

Bandine realized his intent and threw himself away from the bar at the man. Holichek tried to jump to his feet, but Bandine reached him before he was fully erect.

His first blow caught Holichek solidly, swinging him around to fall heavily against the bar. Bandine lunged after the man and struck again. Nadell saw Holichek's face go white with shock. It straightened him back against the bar, and Bandine moved in close, hitting him again and again.

It was punishment no man could stand long. Holichek made a feeble effort to block the blows, but Bandine swept his arms aside and sank his fist deep into the man's belly.

With a retching sound, Holichek tried to wheel away, but Bandine caught his torn and bloody shirt, pulling him back and pinning him to the bar with another blow. Holichek's face contorted and his whole body went slack and he fell helplessly against Bandine. The redheaded man held him up, gasping:

"Where is he, Holichek?"

Holichek's groaning sound was muffled against Bandine's shirt, and he tried to push free without answering. Bandine caught him by the shirt with both hands and swung him violently around. The back of Holichek's knees struck a chair and he fell into it, slack as a rag doll. The only thing that kept him from sliding out was Bandine's grip on his shirt. Bandine was almost as spent, and barely kept from falling across the man. He hit him again, in the face.

"Where, Holichek?"

The words made a husky, sobbing sound in the room. Holichek lunged

feebly up against Bandine, pawing at his hands. Bandine smashed him across the face once more, one side and then the other. Holichek's head was jerked violently to the left and to the right and then lolled slackly over the chair back. His face was loose with shock, his mouth gaping open, a thin flow of blood leaking from his cut mouth into his soggy spade beard.

"Where?" Bandine gasped.

Holichek started to slide limply out of the chair. Bandine jerked him up. Holichek's glazed eyes finally opened, staring at the savagery of Bandine's face, at the fist held to strike again. Holichek's lips moved, but for a moment no sound came out. Finally Nadell heard it.

"Mexican Thickets."

Bandine stared blankly at him, the hoarse sound of their breathing the only noise in the room for a moment. Then Bandine wheeled around, almost pitched on his face, and staggered toward the door. He had to stop near the front end of the bar, hanging there a moment, to get the strength to go on. Then he stumbled out through the batwings and disappeared.

O'Hara went behind the bar for some gin and took it to Holichek. The man spewed up some of it and was sick. Nadell stood by the bar, feeling a thin nausea in reaction to the primitive violence of the fight. O'Hara gave Holichek another drink and he got it all down and a little color returned to his cheeks.

"So you were doing that," Nadell said, then. "You were using a man's own son against him."

Holichek coughed weakly, wiped blood from his mouth. "Don't listen to that crazy Bandine. The important thing is that he didn't sign with Guthrie. You're in, Major. We'll be calling you Senator now."

"If you'd use a man's own son against him, to gain your ends up here, what would you use down in Austin, to gain your ends?"

Holichek raised his head, staring blankly at Nadell. "What?"

"My daughter tried to tell me how you and Bob really operated a long time ago. I guess I had to see it for myself. I feel as though I've been a child, Holichek, and I've just grown up. You'll have to find yourself another man."

Holichek tried to rise, failed miserably. "Don't talk like that. With Bandine out of it, we'll have everything our way. But it won't do any good without you. The fence cutters were our big weapon. When they find out I told where they were gathering, we'll lose them for good. All we have left is you."

"Then you haven't got anything left," Nadell said, "because I'm through with you."

Chapter Twenty-One

Out in the Brush Again

THERE was something sly and secretive about the crackle of brush as it parted before the passage of the seven riders. Afternoon sunlight spun a honeyed maze through the mats of chaparral, its heat drawing a rancid scent of rotting mesquite beans from the deep layer of decay on the ground.

Mexican Thickets lay only a half mile ahead, and Rusty could see the knowledge reflect a growing tension in the faces of his six companions. They had been riding a game trace that had

forced them to travel single-file for an hour, but now they broke into a pear flat, and Garrison and Revere dropped back to flank Rusty, while Graves and Tevis and the two Mexicans bunched up from the rear.

Rusty had ridden all the way in miserable silence, trying to down all the conflict his decision had brought. Finally he could bear it no longer, and asked Revere:

"Do you really think this will do it, Revere? So many fences have been pulled down, but it hasn't stopped them—"

"But never like this, amigo," the half-breed said, putting a reassuring hand on Rusty's shoulder. "Never the whole countryside rising up as one man and swearing not to stop till every fence in the land is pulled down. We must save Santero somehow. We must save ourselves. This is the only weapon we have left."

Rusty shook his head, recalling all the other times he had heard those arguments. Out in the thickets with some gathering of sun-blackened brushpoppers whose cattle had died of thirst because fences cut off their water. In the smoky torchlight of O'Hara's cantina, with Holichek's husky voice in his ear, surrounded by the dark and sweating faces of men whose comradeship was based on the cause. It had all seemed gallant and conspiratorial then, a cause worth fighting for. To Rusty, his father and the big operators had been completely wrong, completely unjustified. But now, as Revere went on talking, he found the doubts stirring.

"I too did not think your father would join us, Rusty. But I guess we did not realize how truly blind with power Emery had become—"

He broke off at the distant crackle of thickets, and all the men began checking their horses, turning in their saddles. Rusty wore no revolver, but had a Winchester booted under his left stirrup leather. He realized that his hand was touching its butt plate.

"None of Friar's men would be fool enough to make that much noise," Tevis said.

"Might be my brother," Billy Graves muttered. "He stayed in town to see what happened when Bandine came down."

The crash of brush grew louder and the horses began tossing their heads and fiddling. There was a muted creak of rigging as the men shifted uneasily in their saddles.

"We better pull into the brush," Garrison said.

Graves shook his head. "It must be Lee. This is the only way we'd take to Mexican Thickets and he's the only one coming from that direction that would know it."

Garrison jerked his horse around and started for the protection of brush anyway, but they had quarreled too long. With a last cannonade of crashing brush, the rider burst into the flat.

Rusty felt himself lift in the saddle as he recognized his father on a roan he had run almost to death. Bandine leaned back against his reins and wheeled his animal toward them, pulling it to a halt. He almost had to shout to be heard over the roar of its labored breathing.

"Rusty, get out of here. Holichek spilled the beans. The whole town must know where the fence cutters are gathering by now. It'll get out to Friar and he's liable to come down on you anytime—"

Rusty settled back into his saddle, bitterness giving a gray, aged look to

his face. "You can't get me out now, Dad. You finished it when you signed with Guthrie."

Bandine put the spurs to his horse, jumping it toward them. "I didn't sign with Guthrie, jigger."

It ran through Rusty like a spasm. He leaned forward in the saddle, searching his father's face for the truth. Bandine was almost among them, and Tevis kicked his horse out to flank the man, hand on his gun. Garrison edged his animal in on Bandine's other side, saying to Rusty:

"Don't listen to him, kid. We all saw him go in that hotel. He's probably got a hundred men out in the thickets. He's just trying to get you away before it starts."

"We haven't time to argue," Bandine said. "No telling how soon the news will reach the sheriff. He'll be coming this way to Mexican Thickets. I can't let you be caught in it, Rusty. I didn't sign with Guthrie. You've got to believe me."

Rusty had never heard his father plead with anyone before, but the man was doing it now; he might as well have been on his knees. It shook the resolve in the youth. Garrison saw him wavering, and cursed thinly.

"It's a trick, I tell you." His dark face turned to Tevis, who had edged his horse to within a couple of feet of Bandine's flank. "Get his gun, Tevis!"

The man reined his horse hard into Bandine's lathered roan, grabbing for Bandine's six-shooter. He got it out but Bandine wheeled to catch his wrist and heave upward on it. The leverage twisted Tevis right off his horse. At the same time, Bandine saw Garrison go for his gun, and spurred his roan at the man. The spooky animal quartered heavily into Garrison's horse, allowing Bandine to knock the man's arm up as his gun came free. Unable to shoot Bandine, Garrison brought his gun arm back down in a violent motion that whipped the heavy weapon brutally across Bandine's face. With a hoarse cry, Bandine pitched backward out of the saddle.

The roan reared up, blocking the fallen man off from Garrison, who tried to rein his dancing horse around the roan's rump for a clear shot at Bandine. As Rusty realized the man's intent, he yanked his Winchester from its boot, snapping the finger lever and shouting:

"Garrison, stop it—"

The man whirled spasmodically in his saddle, saw Rusty's gun, and fired. But his pirouetting horse threw his aim off and the bullet went wild. Rusty squeezed his trigger and saw it strike Garrison's shoulder, tearing him around and out of the saddle.

Tevis had rolled over on the ground, dazedly pawing for his six-shooter. Rusty whipped the Winchester toward him, and Tevis froze. The gun covered the other riders, also, aborting whatever they had meant to do.

Rusty lifted his left leg over the horn and slid off facing them. Then he went to his father, holding them with the threat of his gun. Bandine's face was covered with blood and he lay inert as a dead man. Sick and trembling, Rusty spoke to Tevis.

"Throw him over his horse. I'm getting him out of here."

EMERY BANDINE regained consciousness in the hovel of Santero Morales, with the old man's hand-carved saints staring at him from every corner. There were other faces—Doc Ainsworth, Chico Morales, Rusty, Claire.

"I must of been out a long time,"

Bandine said feebly.

Claire sat at the head of the bunk, touching his bandaged face tenderly. "The doctor kept you under sedatives through the night. That whack Garrison gave you almost finished the job Holichek started. After Rusty got you away, Billy Graves told the fence cutters you hadn't signed with Guthrie. It stopped them till Dad reached them and convinced them it was true. He's sure Santero will get off if fence cutting isn't a felony."

Chico stood above Bandine, half frowning, half smiling. "Maybe that stops the big war, but the cutting will go on, Emery. You knew that. You knew what you were sacrificing when you turned Guthrie down. It don't matter whether it's mavericking or another bad winter, the Double Bit is finished."

"And I did it for Santero, if that's what you mean," Bandine said. "Santero and Rusty. I guess I couldn't lose either of them, when I came right down to it. Nothing was worth that." He looked up at Rusty. "So we're out in the brush again, jigger. Only the shirts on our backs."

"You know it doesn't matter," Rusty said. "Not as long as we're together again."

Bandine chuckled gruffly to hide the emotion in him. "Now I guess you'll have to be a lawyer," he said.

He saw the last bit of doubt flee the boy's face, saw one of Rusty's rare grins light his eyes. It made him remember, somehow, what Chico had said, long ago.

He is a boy, and you are a man. Until he grows up, that gap will always stand between you.

Well, Rusty was grown up now. He was a man. The rest of it was up to Bandine. He couldn't mend a lifetime of mistakes in a minute. But he had made a good start today. He felt infinitely nearer to the boy than he had been this morning. And he could see the kinship reflected in the boy's face. It would still be a long road, but he was on the right track at last.

Finally Doc Ainsworth said Bandine needed peace and quiet, and asked them to clear out. When the doctor saw Claire hesitating at the door, he pulled on his goatee and grinned and gave her five minutes. After he was gone, Claire remained at the door, studying Bandine darkly.

"Rusty's made me see a lot today," Bandine said. "If I'd gone on being so blind and stubborn, I would have lost him the same as I lost Kit. It made me realize I was to blame for her death as much as Webb. I can't hold it against any of you any more."

She came to him, breathing his name, sitting beside him and taking him into her arms. "You must never leave me again, Emery. You'll start today. You'll come to our home until you're well."

He smiled broadly. "Yes, ma'am."

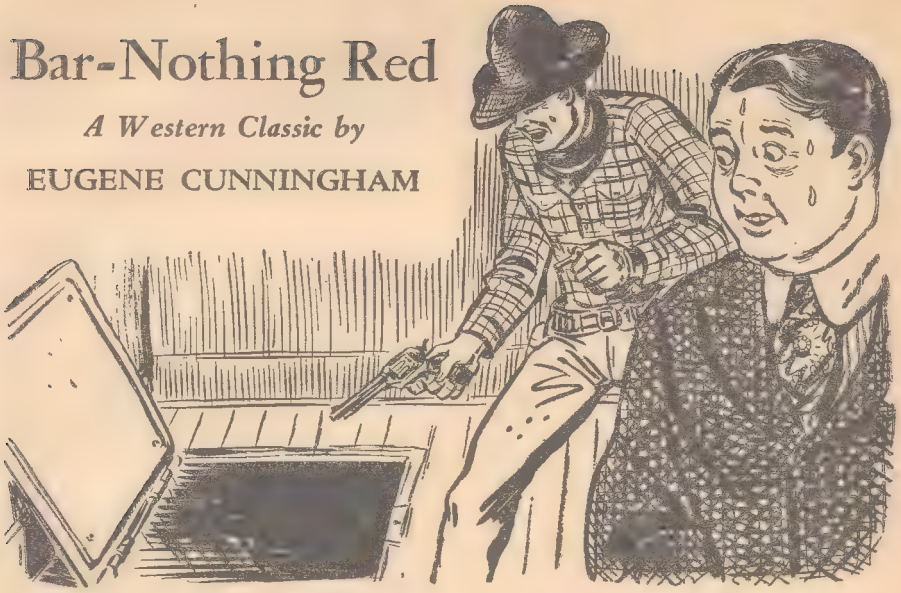
She pouted at him. "And since we're almost man and wife, must you go on being so infernally polite to me?"

He pulled her down to kiss her. "No, ma'am," he said. THE END

Bar-Nothing Red

A Western Classic by

EUGENE CUNNINGHAM



Redheaded Ranger Ames hangs around to roundside with an old friend—and finds himself doing his duty.

"Oh! it's cloudy in the west,
A-looking like rain!
And my blamed old slicker's
In the wagon again!

Coma ti-yi youpy!
Youpy-yi, youpy-yaaa!
Coma ti-yi youpy,
Youpy-yaaa!"

AS A CURRENT weather report, it was sheer libel: the blue Texas sky—well-known to be a bigger sky than is found anywhere else in the United States—arched serenely over the singer's red head, sea for a myriad fleets of snowy cumulus cloud; and the gentlest of tiny spring breezes rippled the cedar brakes on the little hills through which he rode. Mockingbirds sang from low branches along the trail; ahead of him a lank *paisano*—the playful road runner—raced off as if inviting King Solomon, the zebra-dun, to show some enthusiasm. Bar-Nothing Red Ames sang with the energy he put into most things he did, slapping a heel against Solomon's side to set the star rowels jingling in time to *Chisholm Trail.*

But even Bar-Nothing admitted that singing was not particularly his long suit. He preferred coaxing melodies old and new, borrowed and manufactured, from his harmonica. His old friend "Shouting Shelley" Raines could both strum the guitar magically and sing a haunting, "whispering" baritone; Sergeant Ware, the grim little bulldog who fancied Mex' *charro* clothes, was a marvel with the bones, but with the mouth-harp—

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After a bare fifty-sixty verses of *Chisholm Trail*, including the thirty-nine that must never be sung in church, Bar-Nothing fished out the "wind-organ" and rode with head between big, hunched shoulders, swaying to the lilt of its jiggling strains.

He was working through *Der Goot Lager Beer* as Solomon breasted the long slant over the crest of which lay Flagg.

Twice, within the last half mile, he had sighted the church steeple of the little hill town from ridges topped. Solomon moved at a gay little gait not quite a foxtrot, with a flipping of hoofs and whirl of stub-tail. A wise, an educated, horse, Solomon.

Bar-Nothing's eyes were half-closed as the dun topped the rise and faced the brief main street of Flagg. It was a "rock" town in which store and saloon and dwelling-house alike were built of massive blocks of rudely sawed limestone. He was a prairie man, a desert man, himself, but for a while he always liked these wooded hills with their clear little creeks and the quiet old high houses, with roses and honeysuckle and morning glories before them.

He was passing such a house, now—a long, story-and-a-half house with high-pitched roof, set well back with a neat whitewashed picket fence along the street. Casually, Red noted that it had a gallery along the entire front, shielded from the dust and heat of the open by a screen of shiny-leaved madeira vine.

He tickled King Solomon with the rowel, ramming the harmonica into a pocket, looking left and right, chanting absently:

"Der ni-ice lager beer, der goot lager beer!
Not'ings in der world like der bully lager beer!
Goot for der husband; goot for der frau;
Goot for her temper when she kicks up a row—"

A short man, bareheaded, leaped from the gallery and raced down to the gate in the picket fence. His round, boyish face was a brown mask of amazement. Behind him, but more sedately, came a girl—dark and lovely, Bar-Nothing observed appreciatively.

"Red! Bar-Nothing Red!" the young man yelled. "I'd know that hee-haw in—in church! Pull in that Solomon billy-goat, you—"

Bar-Nothing reined in so short that the zebra-dun all but sat down upon his stub-tail. Incredulously, he gaped at Johnny Rafferty, who came whooping like a Comanche out into the street.

"You sawed-off half-pint!" he greeted his old friend. "Howcome you to be ranging up here amongst the grangers? And me thinking you'd been picked and stuffed for a store window! Howcome you can still rove free when good men're getting married and killed off every day? Why—"

He was off King Solomon and Johnny Rafferty was wrapped in long arms and waltzed enthusiastically around the sidewalk. Both grinned affectionately.

It was two years and more since they had last ridden together, as punchers for Old Man Evans's E-66 outfit. Then Johnny had headed out—"for the Nations," he had announced.

"What you using around up here about, Red?" Johnny demanded, when their caracoling had stopped.

"Oh—I come a-looking," Bar-Nothing said easily. "How was the Nations, old-timer?"

"Why—uh—all right—I reckon. You see, here's far as I happened to get—"

"Oh!" Red grunted, turning with complete understanding toward the girl, now coming to the gate. "I—uh—*sabe* fine."

"Annabelle," Johnny called, flushing a little. "This-here is an old sidekick of mine, Mister George-and-Washington Ames. But most generally folks call him Bar-Nothing Red account of the pinkish way he wears his hair and some time he put in prodding the bronco steers for Wolf Kephart's Bar-N spread that was so sort of sudden it was generally read Bar-Nothing. Nothing in particular wrong with old Red; you see lots of horses know less. He's always been lucky; worst things he committed in his life they couldn't prove on him and—"

"Pleased-to-meet-you!" Bar-Nothing greeted the girl, having stopped Johnny's tide of eloquence with a shove. "Reckon we do know each other from the back. But I have been figuring him for an Ace-High Feather Duster up in the Nations all this time, ever since he got jealous of my King Solomon horse and 'lowed he wouldn't stay in the same state with a horse worth more money than he was. Reckon I ought to check up with you on Johnny and if he really has turned over a new leaf and's living a better life, I won't tell the sheriff where he is."

"Oh, Johnny has been a good boy, a very good boy," the girl assured him, smiling.

Bar-Nothing thought abruptly that if a girl like that ever looked sidelong at *him* with that particular light in her eyes, he would do exactly what Johnny had so evidently done—pull off the saddle and stick just as close as she permitted.

"Ye-es, a very good boy," she went on affectionately. "Until things became so quiet on Dad's ranch and Johnny went into business for himself, here, we had all the opportunity in the world to observe him. So we can vouch for his good behavior these past twenty months."

"Business!" cried Red Ames incredulously. "You—business—why, Johnny! You been hiding things like brains from me, all the years? I never would've dreamed any such. What brand of business have you gone and got your li'l' pink toeses into, huh?"

"Oh—general trading, kind of," Johnny said vaguely, with a shrug. The vagueness surprised Red. It was not like Johnny to evade much talk of whatever he was newly engaged in doing. "Got three partners. Doing so-and-so. All right."

"Won't you come in for a while, Mr. Ames?" Annabelle asked. "You must have been in the saddle a long time and dinner's all but on the table. Johnny's staying, of course."

"No-o. No, I reckon I had better be moseying back to the store," Johnny told her, shaking his head.

"Why—why, not ten minutes ago you said you'd stay! What changed you? Anyway, Mother's expecting you."

"Well, then, I will," Johnny surrendered.

By the driveway, King Solomon was taken to the back yard, unsaddled and fed. Then Johnny and Bar-Nothing came back to the long, cool gallery. Annabelle stood there beside a white-haired woman of worn, pleasant face. So, Bar-Nothing learned that Annabelle's name was Stevens; that Ben Stevens, her father, had been a well-to-do rancher but now ran only a few head of cattle and horses on a starve-

out of seven hundred acres. "Hard luck," Mrs. Stevens explained the shrinkage in the family fortunes.

They were all on the gallery when the gate clicked and up the walk came a youngish man of fat, pale face. He wore a tailored suit that looked foreign even upon the fringe of the cow country; in his violently patterned tie was a diamond stickpin and he wore on one pudgy white hand a ring with diamond even larger than the "headlight."

Bar-Nothing leaned back comfortably to study the Specimen. He disliked him at sight and it was plain to see that Johnny and the women watched his approach as if he were branded *Bad News.*

"How do you do, Mrs. Stevens, Miss Annabelle, Mr. Rafferty," the man said quickly. "Mr. Stevens here? I have been —well—rather expecting him to stop by and see me. Is he well?"

"Dad's quite well—physically, Mr. Lewis," Annabelle told him after a quick side-glance at her mother, who seemed whiter of face than before Lewis's coming. "He has gone over to Willits, today. But whether or not he manages to get someone to take over the mortgage, he'll of course come in to see you this week."

"I hope he has complete success in Willits," Lewis said smilingly. "I wish that I could see renewing, but— A banker's bound to be conservative, careful, you know. Money's money. Security's security. The loan was bad, bad! when Mr. Harrington made it four years ago. Like others. Now, stock, land, this house—hardly cover; to say nothing of bank expenses. But if someone else, some friend, say— Well, I'll expect to see him by Thursday."

He lifted his hat, smiled again so that little gray eyes hid themselves between rolls of flesh, went briskly down the walk.

"I try not to hate him," Mrs. Stevens said in a broken voice. "He's quite within his rights, of course. But—it was a sad day for us and for all this country around here, when Sam Harrington died and Lewis bought the bank last year."

"Oh, everything's going to turn out for the best, Motherdy," Annabelle soothed her. "You mustn't worry. Certainly, Mr. Ames isn't to be bothered with our troubles."

"I'd just like to pull my bandanna up over my face and walk into that bank!" Johnny snarled. "I'd stick me a forty-five under Piggy Lewis's nose and make him shell out just an even nine thousand. Then I'd walk around the building and come back in with my handkerchief off and pay him that mortgage money."

"Johnny! You mustn't even think such things!" Mrs. Stevens protested. "Stealing the money to lift the mortgage would be just the one worse thing than—than losing everything by foreclosure."

"Stealing! It wouldn't be stealing. You think that fat money snatcher'd foreclose if he didn't know this minute where he can get a sight more'n nine thousand? If he didn't, he'd be glad to renew on the chance of Dad making it a good year with the Morgans and paying off, the way Sam Harrington'd have done. Or anybody! Taking money off the likes of Lewis wouldn't be stealing. You won't make me believe it!"

Bar-Nothing eyed his old friend sympathetically. Sympathetically and yet— The banker's piggy face, his cold, slate-colored eyes, had roused in him the strongest of dislikes for the man. He felt that he would like to do just what

Johnny had described—ram a Colt muzzle into the fat Lewis-paunch. But, with him it was the thing he might like to do but, of course, would never do. With Johnny—

He studied the cowboy keenly from between narrowed lids. Now that he looked at him coolly, he could see more difference in the boy than was made by the ill-fitting store clothes, the pulling of pants legs over his boots instead of jamming them any-old-how into bootlegs.

He was older; a good deal older than two years justified. He was vastly more serious in times of quiet. Too, there was about him a certain vague air of trouble, worry, kept as well as possible under the skin.

For all the shadow left by Lewis, the midday dinner was a cheerful meal enough. Bar-Nothing put himself out to make it so. He let his imagination run its paces unhobbled, to paint wildest pictures of the amazing past of Johnny Rafferty. Himself he drew always as the mild, upright young man living only to be a restraining and refining and uplifting influence upon uncurried companions. Even Mrs. Stevens forgot her trouble as she listened aghast to the incredible tales. Annabelle's dark eyes kept shuttling from the narrator's solemn-to-grieved face to that of the squirming Johnny.

"Listen at him, now will you!" Johnny yelled at last. "My—Sacred Steers of Sheba! You could think, couldn't you, a high stack of hymn books wouldn't melt in his mouth! You could believe, I bet you, that the Tide of Salvation rolled up and down between Palo Duro Canyon and the Pecos hooked to King Solomon's rotator-tail."

He drew a long breath, waggling a finger at his old friend. "Yeh! But *this* is the kind of hairpin he really is, this Bar-Nothing Red! He was driving a big bunch of she-stuff up the Pecos, Red was, for old Wolf Kephart. Was a wholesale-style cow thief went by *Muchacho*. No Mex' but some breed of foreign Dutch; two-gun *hombre malo* from who-laid-the-chunk. *Muchacho*, he sent word like he often done to a trail boss that he needed them Bar-N cows in his business and soon's he got a minute to spare he'd just nicely drift by and gather'm. He—"

"Now, you listen here, you Johnny Rafferty!" Bar-Nothing interrupted in severe tone. "It's not right, filling these nice ladies up with those plumb-lies. Mis' Stevens, I do hope you don't pay a bit of attention to him. Down on the E-66 the boys just gave up and called him Ananias Lyon Rafferty—for short. He—"

"Shut up yourownself!" Johnny commanded, grinning. "I aim to read'm your brand. Like I was telling you, *Muchacho* sent his li'l' word. Then he come drifting along with a couple right hard characters just as Red had bedded down his herd. So—there was the herd and there was Red out in the big open on Solomon! *Muchacho* yanked out his persuader and loped towards Red.

"We-ll, I always did think Red's a teenchy shade better with a hogleg than what he can do with a Winchester, but he can play a tune on a long gun all-same's his blame' mouth-harp. So—when the other two thieves saw *Muchacho* piling off onto the ground they took their foot in their hand and started remembering things to do at home they had ought to've done yesterday and cut stick. But that's all the good it was—Red did bead down too fine on one of'm and kill his horse, but when the sheriff rode out all he needed

was one Bible and two doctors."

"He's just sitting there making every bit of that up out of his own head! Nobody ever heard of a thief name' *Muchacho* on the Pecos from Anton Chico to the Rio Grande. I begin to misdoubt I ever rode for the Bar-N, now that he swears to it!"

"You come along and see town with me," Johnny said cheerfully. "It was just due me to show nice folks the kind of people I have got to live down, now that I'm trying to be respectable."

"Are you staying long in Flagg?" Annabelle asked Red. "I hope so! We'd like you to come here as often as you can. Dad used to ride down in your country, when he was young. I know he'll enjoy catching up on it with you."

"I just do'no'," Bar-Nothing said slowly, then grinned. "You see, I have got just the restlessest horse between the Bravo and a given point. When Solomon's hoofs start itching, bumping'm against the road's the only way to scratch'm. But I'll cer'nly like talking to your pa."

As they walked toward the center of town, with the resaddled King Solomon trailing doglike, Bar-Nothing looked curiously at Johnny.

"So you're a storekeeper, now."

"Oh—sort of," Johnny answered with return of the aloof manner Bar-Nothing had marked in him before. "Got three partners. Reckon that's too many for a store in a town this size. But they figure we can maybe build up trade out in the country, with the farmers and little ranchers; make good money after a while."

"Your partners people from around here?" Bar-Nothing asked idly; he was pondering a certain question of his own.

"Why, no. They're from back around Fort Worth and Dallas. I really do'no' a lot about'm, except that they hit Flagg with money to put into a business. They took up with me account I know the folks around. I only put in four hundred—what I'd saved out of my pay from Dad Stevens."

Now, why the devil— Bar-Nothing was questioning himself, hardly heeding Johnny's grudging explanations—*don't I tell this boy about being a Ranger and how I'm trailing a couple salty ones?*

He was honestly puzzled at his hesitance. But, product of the range as he was, he acted usually as instinctively as any wolf. Instinct kept him quiet, now; he had no impulse to tell even Johnny about his official status and the errand on which he had been sent two months before. Orders from Austin had sent him after Ed Rice and Al Burroughs, long wanted for enough crimes between them to explain a medium-sized penitentiary—with hangman.

Where the wanted pair had gone the Rangers had no idea. But it was eastward that the trail pointed—after many twists and much doubling; Flagg was only a place to be passed. Now, he made him a plausible tale of "a deal with a couple fellows" whom he expected to meet in Flagg or perhaps in Tyroe beyond. Johnny seemed as little interested in the explanation as Bar-Nothing had been in his. He grunted Uh-huh! and Yeh! at approximately the right intervals. But all the time he was staring straight ahead with somber eyes.

"This-here's our place," he said at last, as they reached a one-story stone building. "Nothing much to look at, but Case and Hilman and Smith 'low we'll make her pay. Not being too much at storekeeping, I take their word for it."

Adjoining the building was a vacant lot with small stone shed in its center. A blank rock wall bounded the other side of this lot. Upon that wall a large sign announced *The Bank of Flagg.*

Sight of the sign brought back to Red thought of Lewis. He was disappointed about that bank. Captain Hewey had told him to look up Sam Harrington on the way through Flagg and both pass a general warning about the Rice-Burroughs combination and present his—Hewey's—respects. For in the old days Hewey had been a private in Harrington's famous Ranger company.

"A gardener, too!" Bar-Nothing breathed suddenly, pointing with chin.

Johnny looked absently at the plowed face of the vacant lot, then shook his head as if still thinking of—mortgages?

"Uh-uh. That's Hilman's doings. He likes to mess around with garden truck, so he got that ground plowed up. Let's go inside."

There was a small, dark-faced man putting bolts of cloth on a shelf in the rear, when they came in. He looked up and nodded.

"Fish for dinner, Johnny? Thought you weren't coming back."

"Met an old sidekick. Red, this-here's Will Case. Mr. Ames, Will. Where's the rest of the spread?"

"Out in the country, somewhere, conferring with the farmers. Didn't Sam Hilman tell you his bright, new notion? He thinks if we trade merchandise for crops and ship East and have his uncle in Dallas handle the sale there, it might beat straight selling."

Case picked up a heavy cane that was hooked to the shelves near him and came limping forward to shake hands with Bar-Nothing. He moved painfully with tightening of mouth at each step that flung his right leg out to the side. But his smile was cordial.

"Glad to meet any friend of Johnny's. Just riding through?"

"Right! Just a-looking. Johnny used to side me, nursing cows down on the E-66 in the mesquite country. I was pleased to run onto him, here."

They talked a little, Case and Bar-Nothing. Johnny's mind was plainly grazing elsewhere. Bar-Nothing Red straightened at last, looking at Johnny.

"I'm sticking till tomorrow, anyhow," he said. "Reckon I'll drift across to your hotel and loop me a bed. See you some more, Johnuel."

"Huh? Oh—'solutely! This is your hangout, Red."

Just ain't the old Johnny a li'l' bit, Bar-Nothing told himself as he crossed to the little hotel. *Well—girl or a mortgage either one's plenty to sag a man's mind. He's got both.*

When he had seen King Solomon comfortable in a stall and arranged for his own lodging, he came out to sit on the hotel gallery with a week-old *Dallas News.* But as he looked over the paper he glanced often at the Bank of Flagg over the way. Was it his duty to pass on to this fat, foreclosing Lewis man a vague warning that two *hombres malos* were ranging this region—maybe—and that bankers had best be on guard?

As he smoked and read, he told himself that, while he would be *grieved* if Rice and Burroughs drove up with a green wagon and loaded Flagg Bank into said vehicle—Bain, Studebaker, or other first-rate brand; wheels, red—he would recover. But—he was a Ranger.

When Lewis showed in the bank doorway and after looking up and down the street seemed to stare straight at him, Bar-Nothing shrugged.

I'll do it! he decided. *Funny! Wonder*

if after all these happy years I'm starting to grow a cawnscience? I'll just speak to this mortgaging person not as a Ranger but as a friendly cowboy that met a big, pretty Ranger like—like me!

But as he came erect and took his first step, Lewis's head jerked. He went backward; disappeared. Bar-Nothing stepped into the street, loafed across and into that doorway.

The bank had a grilled partition that almost crossed the room, leaving a narrow passage on the left. At the end of this "hall" was a solid-looking door, closed. Behind the grille a gray-haired, rabbity little man perched on a tall stool at a high desk, writing in a great book. Lewis was not in sight. Bar-Nothing asked for the banker and the little man shook his head four jerks.

"Can't see him! He's busy! Busy! Can't be disturbed!"

"But this is real important—to him. Will you tell him a man name' Ames wants to talk to him just a minute or six?"

Again the gray head jerked, but under Red's stare the bookkeeper shrugged at last and slipped from his perch. He went with uneager steps to the door at passage-end, opened it and went out of sight. The inner room held him for no more than seventy seconds. He had gone in a nervous rabbit, he plunged out a scared rabbit.

"Mister Lewis says that when he says he's busy—he's busy!" he told Red pantingly. "No time to waste on strangers!"

"Why—that swoll'-up skinful of nothing!" Bar-Nothing drawled meditatively. "I am downright unhappy he won't come out to hear some parts of my notions about him. *Ah-ah!* Soothe yourself down, fella! Nobody's aiming to hurt you: needn't keep your hand on that gun in the drawer. *I* don't want ary such one-horse bank as this. If I did I'd just scoop her up and ram her into my breeches pocket. But big chickens don't eat runty corn. Was I to catch such a bank as this I'd pull her off my hook and throw her back. Along with Mis-ter Lewis, you can tell him."

He went out humming cheerfully. At least, he had tried to do his duty like the Boy in the Third Reader. Now, if ever the Bank of Flagg happened to be robbed, his conscience was clear.

If cawnscience is what that is in spite of what I really believe, he told himself, grinning.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, he came back from aimless wandering about the outskirts of the little town to see Johnny on the store gallery. Two men were with Johnny, and Bar-Nothing wondered if they were the partners who had been in the country earlier in the day. One was a stocky, dark man, the other a tall, stooping figure of graying hair, wearing spectacles low on the bridge of his nose.

As Bar-Nothing turned that way Johnny and the younger man went inside. The gray man crossed the gallery, stepped into the vacant lot and disappeared around the corner of the stone shed. When he reappeared with a rake and began harrowing the plowed ground, Bar-Nothing placed him as Hilman, the gardener; so doubtless the dark younger man was Smith.

Further proof of the changes in Johnny Rafferty were furnished as the day wore on. Bar-Nothing lounged about the hotel until the meal hour, ate his supper, got up again without having seen Johnny. The store was darkened when he came outside.

He shrugged. It was the way things went: a man took on new interests, struck off on a private trail, and perhaps found old acquaintances a hindrance to him in his new way of living.

Tomorrow, he decided, he could drift on. Quiet talk, guarded questions, during the afternoon, had given him no word of strangers mysterious in the scope of country about Flagg.

He wandered upstreet in the dark and stopped beneath a tree to make a cigarette. His thoughts were with Johnny and Annabelle Stevens as he stood opposite that stone shed in the vacant lot by the store of Johnny and his partners. Cigarette in mouth, he was fumbling a match from his hatband when three dark figures moved at a quick walk—almost a run—from the shed toward the rear of the store.

Bar-Nothing Red watched curiously. Those might be any outstanding trio of Flagg citizens; might be Johnny and a couple of his partners; but—that almost-racing walk seemed odd. Even in the darkness he had skylined them well enough to see one as considerably taller than the others—as Hilman of the gray hair was taller than Johnny or Smith. Case was out of the business—that painful limp of his ruled him out of the fast-moving group.

George Washington Ames! Bar-Nothing told himself severely. *You are building up more fool-inquisitiveness than a tame elk. If three solid citizens are slipping off from their loving wives to play poker or similar— If Johnny and his partners have got some quiet hurry-business— You go on back to the hotel, or try knocking at the Stevens's door— Anything I do hate it's a Meddlesome Matty—*

So he went like a shadow—or an Apache—or a Ranger—for fifty yards upstreet, crossed, and came back on the side upon which lay that vacant lot. When he came noiselessly to the stone shed it was as silent as the dark store beyond.

Gently, he explored the door. It was of heavy planking and secured by a large iron lock. There was no other opening in the four thick walls. He had no picklock such as Shelley Raines and Bill Ware both carried habitually. The roof was shingles, but even if he found a ladder somewhere and got in without being heard, sign of entry would be plain next day. Red had no ambition whatever to make a fool of himself if, as seemed probable, there was nothing really wrong here. On the other hand, if something were off-color, he wanted nothing to alarm the—

Whoever 'tis! he told himself, going back to the hotel.

But there was more in his mind, somehow, than that vague thought. He was beginning to feel worried about Johnny Rafferty. It was well enough to say that Johnny was doubtless busy today, but that explanation simply wasn't good enough to cover Johnny's failure to show up hunting his old and one-time best of friends. Add to that his look of a man in brownest of studies and this scamper across the dark lot from shed to store—even only past shed and toward store—

Rice and Burroughs can just nicely wait a day, was Red's thought. *They cer'nly have been waiting quite a spell. Maybe I'm just boogering at myrages but I wouldn't be easy my last day, I went off not knowing sure-for-certain about Johnny. So—*

WHEN HE WAKED AT DAWN, the small mystery of the night before slid instantly into his mind. But the puzzle

failed completely to affect his appetite. He ate enormously and talked between bites to the pink and buxom widow who was his landlady. She told him this and that about Flagg, past and present; remarked the town's people and their comings and shortcomings as an observant woman knew them—which was very well, indeed!

So he heard some things which he knew—as that Harrington had been storekeeper before turning banker—and that today's Bank of Flagg was merely the old Harrington store—and that it was good for Johnny Rafferty and his not-too-popular partners that no Harrington, only the Lancasters, kept store against them.

"Not," Mrs. Toowhit said flatly, while she leaned on the table at no more than proper distance from her tall and admittedly unmarried guest, "that they're going to hurt the Lancasters much, what they take. Lancasters have had the business many's the year and our folks don't change quick—without good reason."

"What's wrong with Johnny's partners—specialish?"

"Nothing—specialish." She laughed. It was a nice laugh. "If you showed up tomorrow, Mister Ames, with that pretty auburn hair of yours all crow-black, I might think it become you though I must say I like it the way it is now. But I'd think one of two things: you had a girl that liked brownettes, or—Rangers was due—"

"Corn-colored hair's *my* favoryte," Bar-Nothing said automatically, with automatic, admiring, roving look at hers. "But—"

"Smith dyes his hair. His stuff comes from Dallas and once a bottle broke in the post office. He looked mightily light until the next bottle got here. Then there's that Case—playing for sympathy, is my notion. More than once I've looked across into the store and he was by himself and walking 'most as good as anybody. Just carrying that cane."

Other customers called her away and she went, if without too much look of pleasure. Bar-Nothing went out to the gallery to smoke and think.

Flagg was crowded, this morning. It was payday in the country around and cowboy and farmhand seemed to have come fast into town.

Smith dyes his hair. Case limps more'n he needs to. Neither one is known around here. Landed in Flagg, along with Hilman, bringing tol'able rolls. Teamed up with my Johnny because he was known and well-liked. Mean something? Just a come-a-diddle?

He thought all around that, watching the Durham smoke. Automatically, as any good Ranger would, he set those three against the word-portraits in his *List of Fugitives from Justice*—"the Ranger Bible."

There were several possibilities but two were closer than others. So close that he almost laughed: Rice and Burroughs, the bank and train robbers, ruthless killers. Ed Rice was described as a short, yellow-haired man with green-gray eyes. Burroughs was small and dark and walked with a quick, nervous step.

Lovely! he congratulated himself sardonically. *I amble up to Flagg hunting fifteen thousands dollars' worth of shackle stuff and find 'm corraled for me. Well—anyway—it might be such a thing that I'd land me a cottontail on a bear hunt. Maybe they tromped on the grass up in Dallas City Park and the sheriff'll pay a dollar a head for 'm—delivered. But, if they're Rice and Burroughs, who's Hilman? Never heard of*

that partnership taking in an outsider. About the one thing we do know—except their work!

But when he dismissed the thought of Rice and Burroughs he still had Johnny Rafferty on his mind. *Was* it just worry about the Stevens mortgage—and dark prospects for his own business—that bore down on the boy?

Which brought back Rice and Burroughs! Suppose—just to be supposing, not believing it one BB little bit—that the two stickup experts were here; come in to hole up and scheme out a big campaign as they had done more than a half-dozen times, they had discovered a good candidate for their work, a man who—if he could be tolled over the line into outlawry—could be trusted utterly—

I oughtn't be boggling at the notion! Bar-Nothing reminded himself. *How many old friends of Johnny and me are with the Wild Bunch—caught and pushed at just the minute they happened to be wobbling? Same's Johnny, now, about that mortgage—and Annabelle. If ever I see a boy ripe to cash in his six-shooter to help out his friends—It just mustn't come off! Rice and Burroughs be squizzled! Johnny's on the ragged rim of something all on his own!*

There was a tiny building on the lot that adjoined the Stevens homestead. Here, by Mrs. Toowhit's gossip, the nephew of the Stevens's Chinese cook carried on a laundry business in partnership with his uncle. Wo Lee, the ancient, shriveled cook, was an institution in Flagg County. Mrs. Toowhit had spoken humorously of the bitter arguments between young nephew and old uncle. For Wo Lee handled all the money of the partnership, made all the decisions.

Bar-Nothing had been told of the day when neither uncle nor nephew would admit to knowing Johnny Rafferty from Adam, because Johnny had lost the ticket for his bundle.

Now, leaving the hotel, he saw Wo Lee coming upstreet with a piece of paper held straight out before him—rather as if it were something that might be dangerous. Wo Lee passed and vanished into the bank. Bar-Nothing crossed to enter the store where Johnny Rafferty and Case stood just inside the door.

"Hi!" Johnny greeted him, something awkwardly. "You—uh—sleep all right? Aimed to hunt you up, but—"

"Trade ought to be rushing, today," Bar-Nothing said easily. "All this crowd—thicker'n splatter—money in the till, huh?"

Case laughed and they were talking of business when Wo Lee popped into the store, with the suddenness of an ancient jumpingjack. He waved the paper Bar-Nothing had seen him carrying. His mummy-wrinkled yellow face worked spasmodically.

"No money! Bank bust! Tell Wo Lee no got'm money! Looka!"

Bar-Nothing took the paper—a check—and saw written across it in red ink *No Funds*. Wo Lee snatched it back and jumped out of the door again. As he went his shrill old voice shrieked the tale:

"Bank go bust! Tell Wo Lee no got'm money! Bank bust—"

Bar-Nothing flung back his head, bellowing. Case, Johnny, a handful of customers, stared bewilderedly.

"It— It—" Bar-Nothing gasped. "Somebody handed him that check and never had money to cover it. Bank told Wo Lee 'no funds' and he thinks it's the *bank* that's out of cash. But—if

somebody don't head him off, he's going to start a run on Friend Lewis like that time we saw in El Paso, Johnny! Takes mightily little to make folks worried about what they put into a banker's ice-cold paw!"

He moved to the door and looked out. "Hey! It's started! Look at 'm milling—stampeding!"

Past the doorway men and women were running—townsfolk, cowmen, farmers. Their gabbling made a rising wave of sound like water on a beach, louder and louder.

"Bank pretty strong?" Bar-Nothing asked Johnny, who seemed deaf to the uproar, indifferent to the excitement, only stared at the wall. "Reckon Lewis has got enough to pay off that slew?"

"Huh? Oh! Bank—Lewis— Why, I reckon so. What I heard, he's out of a rich family and a kind of a family string of banks. He ought to have plenty in the old vaults downstairs to pay off every check or give back every cent folks have got in there."

"Then a good friend or not so bad enemy ought to tell him to get up the Green and the Gold in sight. Nothing like a look at cold cash to quieten a worried bunch. Think I'll wander down and tell him so. Anyway, somebody's likely to get tromped, that herd all trying to shove inside at once."

"Tend bar, will you, Johnny?" Case asked abruptly. "Foot's twinging. Liniment's back yonder. Got to—get it!"

He limped, but still moved rapidly, toward the dusky rear of the store. Johnny seemed to have forgotten Bar-Nothing. He stood staring fixedly after his partner, eyes narrow, mouth a tight gash. Without a word, he followed Case.

Bar-Nothing let them go and himself went out. Before the bank was a solid mass of men, with here and there a woman. The people surged a little and Bar-Nothing guessed that the door had been shut in their faces. He moved that way and as he took his first step a flash of something dark by the stone shed in the vacant lot caught his eye. He went on, then abruptly stopped and drew a great breath.

"You—long-eared jack!" he whispered to himself.

Across the lot he sprinted and flattened himself against the shed, Colt out and ahead of him. He peered around at the rear wall in which the doorway was set. The door was closed but the lock hung open in the heavy hasp. He snapped hasp on staple, lock on staple, then ran toward the bank. When he forced his way toward the front door he saw six or eight inside, who ignored the yells of those without to open and let them in.

"Texas Ranger!" Bar-Nothing yelled over and over. "Shut up! I'm a Ranger! Gi' me room! I'll settle this business for you! Le' me through, you want your money!"

That magic word *Ranger* brought quiet and a passage. He rapped on the window through the bars with his Colt.

"Open that door!" he bellowed. "Open up or I'll shoot a door right here! This is the Rangers talking!"

The door was unbarred and he shouldered through. Lewis was not in sight and Bar-Nothing went down the narrow passage to that heavy door which ended it. That, too, was locked. Bar-Nothing pounded it with Colt barrel.

"Lewis!" he yelled. "This is Ranger Ames. Come out. I'll straighten out this clabber for you. Open—or I shoot it open!"

The lock rattled. Then Lewis's face, tallow-gray, appeared. Bar-Nothing pushed door and banker back. He was

grinning.

"You wouldn't listen to me, yesterday. But it just so happens—good luck and no thanks to you—that my business here in Flagg is going to help you out. Got enough in the vaults to pay off all that mob?"

"Not by half! But enough to pay off all who should rightfully present withdrawal orders. I can get all I need from Dallas—from my father's bank—but it will take time—"

"Let's haul out what you have got and start paying off. Meanwhile, I'll tell these folks what really started the stampede. Likely, when they hear the facts, they'll start putting it back."

"But—how do I know you're what you say? A Ranger?"

"Here's my orders—from the Cap'n—sending me after Rice and Burroughs the bank robbers—telling me to see Harrington, here—"

"But—Case told me that Smith is the Ranger—under cover! Looking for Rice and Burroughs. He said they suspected you!"

"The *naughty* boy! Where does he expect to go when he dies? Tell you: we'll just take a look at 'Case'—and 'Smith'—and ask 'm. That the vault trapdoor yonder? Old Harrington store cellar, huh?"

Lewis nodded dumbly. He handed over a great iron key and Bar-Nothing unlocked the sheet-iron trapdoor in a corner of the office. He flung back the trap with a clang—standing cautiously well back.

"Come out of that—one at a time!" he ordered grimly. "Ed Rice! Al Burroughs! You that call yourself Hilman! And—and Johnny Rafferty! I've got the tool shed locked and if I bring a posse after you, we'll bodaciously come a-shooting!"

"They'll come, all right," Johnny Rafferty's muffled voice proclaimed. "I've got their hardware, Red. Up you-all go. Better remember, when you hit the top, you'll be facing a hogleg I never did see miss!"

Up from the vault came the tall, stooping "Hilman," hands in air, following by "Smith" and by "Case"—who had left his cane and his limp behind him. Last of all was Johnny Rafferty with a Colt in each hand and smiling grimly.

"I have been suspicioning these gunnies for quite a spell," he told Bar-Nothing. "So when Case jumped for the back of the store awhile back, I figured that these two here wasn't *so* far out in the country but what opening up the bank vault'd locate'm. So I loped after Case and, sho' 'nough! He'd dived into the shed and down that tunnel to warn 'm. I threw down on 'm before they figured out what it was all about."

Bar-Nothing gaped at Johnny.

"You damn' li'l' sawed-off runt, you! You've been acting so double-shush funny I couldn't figure what to think about you. You sized these gunnies for Rice and Burroughs?"

"Not a thing else, since last week when a fellow told me about the Rangers being on their trail. Then you drove up and that bothered me plenty. For I had to be watching these hairpins."

"But—but—why— Why'n't you ask me to pitch in? Then I would've told you I've been in the Rangers since right after you cut stick off the E-66."

"Well—" Johnny stared miserably at his toes—"if things'd been like old times, I would have done exactly that and glad to. But I couldn't see enough reward to split, Red. You see—I've *got* to loop nine thousand, to pay off Dad

Stevens's mortgage to Lewis, here."

"Reckon you can see your way clear to waiting for your money till Johnny collects the reward?" Bar-Nothing asked Lewis, who had been listening with the air of one hearing an unfamiliar language.

"I'd be worse, even, than this town of Flagg seems to think I am, if I didn't do just that!" Lewis assured him awkwardly.

"Well, then! There's fifteen, not nine, thousand on 'm, Johnny. So you can pay off that plaster and have some left to start out that new—uh—double-harness life."

He smiled heartily at Johnny Rafferty—if thoughtfully, a little sadly. It was the way life went—*es vida!* as the Mexicans said. Your old sidekicks took to themselves wives and responsibilities and old, free friends became something of a drag and a worry. Bar-Nothing, gesturing now to the three sullen prisoners with the barrel of a Colt, found himself picturing a girl's worshipful dark eyes and telling himself again that, if ever he roused a look like that in a girl like that—good-by, single cussedness!

As for stepping from under a share of the reward, why, what did he need with money, anyway? Call it a wedding present! So—

"Cer'nly thank you a lot for looping these holdups for me, Johnny," he said solemnly. "Makes me a good record with the Cap'n, you know. Hadn't been for you, they'd rolled out of town tonight like a bunch of Nueces steers splitting the *brasada.* Why—even that poor Chinese, he'd've been out his seven dollars. Yeh! That was Mister Smith-Rice's check that started the stampede and got 'm trapped in the vault!"

PICK YOUR TERROR

A Western Quiz by Eric Manders

DURING the final Indian campaigns of the 1800's, the Army of the West found itself embroiled with powerful families of nations banded together for making war. On the northern plains were the Sioux, ably led by Red Cloud and Sitting Bull; to the southwest roamed the fierce Apache under Cochise and Victorio. These were the strongest of the confederacies, the last to bury the hatchet. Below are listed ten western tribes; some are Apache, the rest Teton Sioux. It's your job to assign each to its own confederacy. Answers on page 139.

	Apache	*Sioux*
1. Miniconjou	_____	_____
2. Chiricahua	_____	_____
3. Tonto	_____	_____
4. Hunkpapa	_____	_____
5. Jicarilla	_____	_____
6. Sans Arc	_____	_____
7. Brulé	_____	_____
8. Mescalero	_____	_____
9. Oglala	_____	_____
10. Coyotero	_____	_____

Yessir, it was the wimmen that ruined the West!

Petticoats and Dairy Mammas

By T. J. Kerttula and D. L. McDonald

IT HAS BEEN CLAIMED that "bob-wire and nesters" spelled the doom of the open range, but ask any real old cowpoke what really ruined the West and he'll sum it up for you in just one word: "Wimmin!"

It's a fact that the petticoat invasion of the early 1900's did more to make life an unadulterated hell for cowboys than blizzards, drought, Indians, rustlers, rattlers, and whisky combined.

A certain kind of woman—good women—the kind who married the boss—ruthlessly stripped from these carefree knights of the saddle the last vestiges of their glamour. What romantic legend could survive the sight of a top hand in high-heeled boots and tight jeans squatted under the overhang of a tame milk cow, squirting foamy fluid into a shining tin pail?

During the heyday of the open range, cattle ranching was a purely masculine undertaking. The only "she critters" on the place wore long horns, and one old Montana cowman summed them up when he boasted, "We had ten thousand head in the Big Hole, an' you couldn't have got a damn bucketful of milk from the lot of them."

On the trail and during roundups the owner lived with his men, practically as one of the crew. True, he might have had an occasional luxury, such as

a bed inside the wagon, with a bit of canvas to ward off the rain, while the others spread their bedrolls under or around it. But he ate with the boys at the chuck wagon, and if the grub was bad he found it out at first hand.

The cook—usually a Chinese—was expected to have a knowing hand with a mulligan stew, sourdough bread, and a dried-apple pie, but if his coffee brewed in its own grounds until it was strong enough to float a yearling heifer, no one complained. Anyone too soft to drink it straight could thin it with "canned cow."

On the home ranch, it was but natural that one house served owner and rider alike. In its main room they kept their chaps, spurs, ropes, saddles—everything they owned, in fact, except their ponies—conveniently to hand.

By dint of greatly magnifying the dangers from Indians, rattlers, and other natural hazards of ranch life, these skirt-shy pioneers managed to keep womenfolks pretty well confined to the nearest town. But with the turn of the century there came an influx of Eastern schoolmarms intent on civilizing the West's offspring—who were usually pathetically few in proportion to the civilizers—and the gentler sex broke the all-masculine line, spreading like grasshoppers all over the range.

From the cowboy's viewpoint, a new schoolmarm at first seemed an attractive addition to the scenery. Until the day when, feeling the need for fresh air and open spaces, she borrowed a horse and rode out to the nearest knoll to look the country over. Right then she became the arch-oppressor of the forty-a-month cowboy, individually and as a class.

From her hilltop she counted hundreds of cows, then rode to the next hill and counted hundreds more. Putting her "book larnin'" to practical use, she added the counts, multiplied by the going price of cattle on the hoof, and came up with the sound conclusion that *something* should be done about all that footloose wealth. The simplest "something" was to marry its owner.

Hardly was the honeymoon over before her oppression of the cowboy had begun. He and his fellows were banished to the bunkhouse, along with the chaps, spurs, saddles, and other gear that had lent a homey atmosphere to the main room of the big house. She threw out the comfortable homemade benches and tables, and with curtains, rugs, and Grand Rapids furniture proceeded to make it a place no self-respecting waddy could be at home in anyhow.

Even the grubliners, as jobless drifting cowboys were called, knew enough to detour around any ranch house where there were white curtains in the windows and to slink furtively down to the bunkhouse. But even there things were not the same. This was the era when "good women" were the relentless foes of hard liquor. Gone were the all-night sessions with poker chips and a friendly bottle, when the grubliner—a sort of walking newspaper—was the center of the stage and sure of a royal welcome.

Eventually the day came when, checking the Chink's grub list, the lady of the house was horrified to find, among staples to be brought from town, case after case of "canned cow." Now here was a glaring example of the old-time inefficiency of the all-male range industry! Men were hauling canned milk fifty or a hundred miles to a ranch where thousands of cattle roamed. The situation called for im-

mediate correction—and damn quick got it.

With guile, the lady made known to her recently acquired lord and master her craving for fresh milk. Still being a bit new to this woman-stuff, he did not pause to consider the long-range implications of the request. Instead, next morning he collared whatever cowboys happened to be at the home ranch and told them the Missus wanted some fresh milk.

They, assuming that his use of the word "some" implied it to be merely a passing fancy, grabbed whatever utensils were handy, saddled up, and rode off to milk a cow.

Searching until they found a longhorn whose calf was late to breakfast, they gave chase. A half mile or so later on, after a loop had settled over her horns, there would ensue several minutes of frenzied action and ear-burning profanity before she was hog-tied and ready for the milking-pail. Anywhere from three to a dozen riders participated, and they got in all perhaps a tincup full of milk. Then they turned her loose, usually managing to escape any but superficial wounds from her resentful horns, and rode off in search of another cow.

Somewhere around midday they might get back to the ranch house with a couple of quarts of milk. As she watched the boys checking the hornrips in their Levi's and counting their bruises, even the little woman could see some of the reasons for the inefficiency she deplored. One man could haul a whole winter's supply of canned milk from town in a week, at the outside, and it had taken this battered and exhausted crew half a day to get even two quarts of the home-grown product.

The longhorn, whatever other qualities she may have possessed, had not been designed by nature for the purpose of giving large quantities of milk. Or, for that matter, of giving *any* milk at all without a scrap. And she was a scrapper who could battle it out with timber wolves and grizzlies and often come up with a draw, or better. Plainly, even if the cows could stand for daily milking, the cowboys could not.

Far from discouraged, the lady had a ready solution. Why not send Back East for genuine milk cows? Her husband's answer to this was invariably a loud and emphatic "No!" backed up by a thoroughly seasoned range vocabulary. He swore, with justification, that no self-respecting cow—or cowboy—would stay on the same range with those big-bagged critters. Why, the idea was hardly decent!

But persistently the lady chipped away at his armor until eventually he wavered and finally gave in. Perhaps he reasoned it was better to be an outcast among his own kind than to spend the rest of his life listening to her—well, "urging" is perhaps the word for it. Ladies do not "nag."

Of course there were those who said "No!" and went to their graves, forty years later, still saying it. But they were men of rare strength and character, even for the West. Or perhaps they'd just been married longer and had developed to a higher degree the art of not listening. Unfortunately for the cowboy, such men were few.

Usually the order was sent, and in due time the dairy mammas came. Their arrival rocked the range industry. Reeling under the shock of finding out at first hand that the critters needed "juicing" twice a day, riders who had been with the boss for years asked for their time and headed for another

range. But in vain; the whole country was being overrun by milk cows and women. After a while the boys bowed to the new order of things—or else hung up their saddles. The degeneration of the cowboy had begun.

One way and another, the dairy mammas changed the West. Cowboy, cowpony, and longhorn reacted alike to their presence; they came, they saw, they bolted! Probably the little lady never knew how close she came, with the importation of milk cows, to curing the cowboy of his well-known and frequently condemned fondness for hard liquor. Sometimes after the arrival of a bunch of the big-bagged critters which no cowboy ever succeeded in calling by a printable name, the boys skulked around the bunkhouse for weeks, too ashamed to ride to town even for a drink. Until, by some stroke of luck, they discovered that other outfits were afflicted with dairy mammas too.

A still greater indignity was in store for the shaken cowboys. On the lush bunch grasses of the old buffalo range, the dairy mammas gorged and fairly outdid themselves on the production line. There was no reason why the boss's wife should not utilize the extra cream to make fresh butter. There was plenty of manpower around the ranch to take care of the churning.

No one will ever know what extremes the boys were driven to in an attempt to elevate this lowly dairymaid's chore until it would be within the reach of a top hand's dignity. The bucking-horse method was the one most often used. The cream was put in a jug or keg, and firmly lashed to the back of a wild horse. Turned loose in the corral, the bronc was expected to buck it to butter. When he was all through, he was snubbed down and the barrel removed. In addition to the butter manufactured, somebody was saved the first bone-jarring ride on a wild one.

From the viewpoint of the boys, this method was ideal, but usually the boss's wife didn't think much of it. There were entirely too many accidents. Sometimes they got a sulky one, who crowhopped half-heartedly and never got the chore finished. At other times the barrel wasn't lashed securely enough, and a whole churning was wasted. Or the horses fell or rolled on the barrel, and came up dripping cream.

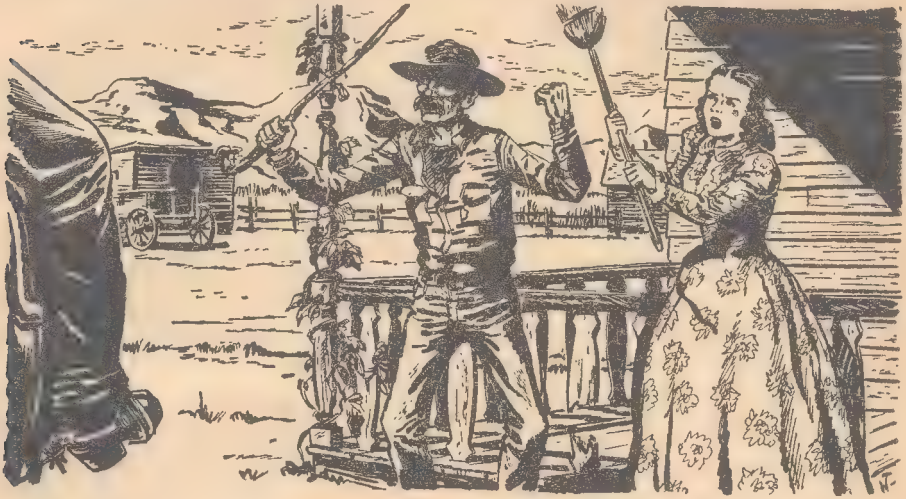
When the boss discovered that animals thus "creamed" never did seem to develop any confidence in mankind, he put an abrupt stop to this method of butter production. So, in the end, softly cursing and embarrassed cowboys found themselves sitting on the back porch, in full view of the boss's wife, churning in the good oldfashioned way.

After this final indignity, the cowboy's spirit was broken. In no time at all he found himself following a new plow, usually painted red, turning up a bit of ground to make the Missus a little garden. And step by step he suffered further as the garden progressed through its various stages.

The poor broken creature in "bib-overhalls" squatting between the bean rows, plucking green pods off the pretty vines—what had he in common with the spurred and booted rider who once had galloped free across the purple sage?

Petticoats and dairy mammas ruled the range, and the cowboy was a farmhand armed with a pitchfork instead of a branding iron. The romance of the West was on the wane.

An old man and a pretty girl on a gone-to-hell spread find it hard to resist salvation, even when it comes in a brash and breezy package.



Ramshackle Ranch

By S. OMAR BARKER

WALT FINLEY reined up his raw-boned buckskin near the weather-warped gallery where wild hop vines half-concealed a rotting corner post. From the scuffed stirrups of his old Heiser saddle to the roll-brimmed relic that had once been a mighty fine Stetson, everything about both man and outfit said "cowhand." Wrinkles around eyes the slow blue of faraway hills were souvenirs of sun and wind, not of age.

Walt sidled in the saddle the way cowboys do when they're fixing to talk. The bony old man sagged like last year's grass in a rawhide rocker on the porch viewed him with little interest.

"Howdy, Mr. Kincannon," said Walt.

"Howdy," said the old ranchman. The word was as noncommittal as yesterday's gravy, nor was it followed by the customary invitation to "light and look at your saddle." The squint under his low-tugged old hat shifted to some faraway hill. One scrawny hand continued to twist at his droop-tailed mustache.

A broom emerged from a near-by doorway, preceded by a small flurry of dust and followed by a brown-haired girl in flowered calico. She kept her back turned to Walt while her frazzly broom scooted the dust across the worn porch. The fullness of her skirt might have tented almost any kind of figure, but it drew in small at the waist to reveal a soft pliancy of youth ill-matched by her listless bearing.

"Good mornin', Miss Kincannon," said the cowboy.

He wanted her to turn around, and she did. Brown eyes wide-set in a sparingly freckled, sweetly rounded face gave him a soberly disinterested looking over.

"Good morning," she said, without smiling, and went back into the house.

"I can see I'm goin' to love it here, Mr. Kincannon!" Walt's grin was mostly in his eyes. "Everybody's so cheerful!"

That brought no response. Walt unstraddled his horse and sat on the edge of the dilapidated gallery. Sifting the last tobacco out of a Bull Durham sack into a brown-paper trough, he saw Jeff Kincannon watching him, and remembered his manners.

"More in my saddlebags," he offered, and started to get up, but the old man shook his head.

"Never mind." His tone was as warpy as a dry board. "I can't smoke no more noway."

Walt settled himself with his back against a porch post, his long legs outstretched in patched Levi's of washtub blue. His worn-out boot soles stared Kincannon in the face. Walt took a deep puff on his cigarette and blew a couple of wobbly smoke rings through his nostrils.

" 'Just like a summer boarder a-waitin' for his hash,' " he grinned, quoting an old cowboy song.

Kincannon showed no interest in smoke rings.

"I've seen the time when I'd work for my keep," said Walt, "and this is it."

"I ain't needin' no cowhands—unless it'd be somebody to put a no-account ol' cull out of his misery." Kincannon sounded bitter.

"I always hate to shoot a man until I'm better acquainted," said Walt cheerfully. "My name's Walt Finley."

"I notice you already know mine!" The old man looked hostile.

Walt caught a glimpse of flowered calico through a near-by open window. He raised his voice:

"A fair-to-medium-lookin' daughter you've got, Mr. Kincannon!"

"You're wastin' your time." The old ranchman sounded more hostile than ever. "Lindy's done spoke for."

"By that young feller in the Stockman's Bank?" inquired Walt. "He seemed mighty interested in sendin' you a cowhand to try and save the pieces."

"If it's any of your business—which it ain't—my daughter's promised to a Bible-college professor where she went to school in Missouri." Kincannon resumed his gaze at a faraway hill.

"I read a Bible story once," grinned Walt, "about an ol' sheepman named Laban. He had two gals named Rachel and—"

Abruptly Kincannon summoned enough strength out of apparent feebleness to pound a thin fist on his chair arm.

"Dadblame it, Finley! How come Jim Clark talkin' to a stranger about my affairs?"

Walt shrugged. "When you want to know who needs cowhands, you ask the local banker. Clark said the J Bar K was shorthanded—so here I am. Any special jobs you want tuned up, or shall I play it by ear?"

The old man did not reply. The girl was no longer in sight. Walt pinched out his smoke and reached for his horse. He jogged the buckskin out to a swaybacked pole corral, dragged the sagged gate open, and rode inside. The corral seemed to have had little recent

use. Sheds and stables looked as discouraged as the old man on the porch, their plank roofs sun-warped, their doors askew or missing entirely.

One look told the story: a once good outfit gone to hell. Drouth could have done it, or thieving, or illness, or any combination of troubles that spelled hard luck. Walt had seen such places before, ramshackled and rusty with neglect, but the hopelessness on Jeff Kincannon's face was a new thing to see. It bothered him. He had marked the same whipped look, in some degree, along with an odd hostility, in the girl's dark eyes. That bothered him even more.

Walt untied the slicker roll of cowboy belongings from behind his saddle and lifted off a pair of worn saddlebags similarly loaded. He propped up a fallen panel of corral fence before turning his horse loose. While the buckskin took a roll, Walt carried his stuff into the gear shed. Its door hung by a single hinge. The room was in neat order, but the dust of disuse was thick upon everything, including two solid, well-worn saddles racked on peeled-pole *burros*. He straddled his own Heiser on an empty rack beside them.

The *vega* hay in the stable loft was time-bleached on top, but green underneath. He pitched a little out on the ground for the buckskin, pampering cowhorse wariness about entering a strange stable long unused.

He found nails in the shed, but no hammer. He was pounding with a rock, replacing the shed door's loosened hinge, when Linda Kincannon came into the corral.

"Pa didn't hire you!" She spoke accusingly behind him.

"Dusty saddles," said the cowboy without looking up. "Don't nobody ever ride around here?"

"Not much—any more. Not since—" The girl broke off abruptly, then went on in a flatly determined tone: "Mr. Finley, my father has a bad heart—and no money to hire a cowhand. Your presuming to stay upsets him, and I can't allow it. Besides, you can do better somewhere else."

"I could do better right here," said Walt, "if I had a hammer! How long has your pappy been down with his head under him?"

"He hasn't been well since— It doesn't matter, does it? I wish you'd go!"

Walt finished fixing the hinge before turning to look gravely down at her. He could see distress written plain on her face, but to analyze the true nature of it had him baffled. Distrust? At least a little. Pride-shame for poverty? Maybe. Concern for her father's health? Some, certainly. Defense? Against what?

"Why, in that case, ma'am," he said soberly, "I'll saddle up ol' Rawhide and drift!"

"Thank you," said Linda Kincannon.

Halfway to the gate she turned.

"We don't aim to be mean, Mr. Finley," she said hesitantly. "You could stay for dinner—if you want to. It won't be much, but—"

"Why, I'm much obliged, ma'am!" The cowboy's slow grin was back again. "But I expect my table manners won't match up with a professor's!"

Linda Kincannon reddened. "Pa had no business saying such things to a stranger!"

"Not even if it's true?"

"When dinner is ready," said Linda primly, "I'll call you."

What makes me always talk out of turn? thought Walt, as he watched her go.

He went over and scratched the buckskin horse's back. "Maybe you better bust a leg, Rawhide! They surely wouldn't expect a man to travel on afoot!"

In the half hour before Linda called him, the cowboy reset two posts and otherwise repaired the geewhonkered corral fence. He washed at a bench outside the kitchen door and wiped on a freshly hung roller towel.

"First wiper gets to kiss the cook," he observed as he went inside. "It's an old cowboy custom."

"That you just this minute invented!" Linda said it with the nearest thing to a smile he had seen so far. "Go on in to the table."

"Bossy with the hired help," said Walt. "It's a bad sign!"

He helped her carry in the dinner. Old Jeff was already at the table. He still looked shriveled and ill, but not as old as with his hat on. He bowed his head.

"O Lord," he said, "bless these vittles to our need. Bless the stranger within our gates—but wherever he's headed, please don't delay him! Amen!"

The dinner was fried salt pork, gravy, canned corn, biscuits, and coffee. The platter of "Texas chicken" was scanty, and the coffee tasted suspiciously like parched barley. But the biscuits were feathery-light and big—cow-ranch style, the gravy toasty brown, without lumps.

" 'I'd choose a gal 'most any height'," recited Walt as he ladled gravy on a split biscuit, " 'a skinny one or dumpy! Just so she makes her biscuits light—an' gravy that ain't lumpy!' "

He couldn't be sure whether Linda wanted to smile and couldn't quite make it or was trying not to. Talking foolishness was fine when it at least kicked out a few grins. It hacked a man to turn on the nonsense and get no response, but Walt still clung to a belief that there was nothing personal in these folks' lack of friendliness.

They've just got a bad case of the low-tailed solemncolies, he thought.

He didn't try again to make conversation during the meal. Rising from the table, he saw Kincannon fumble a pipe out of his pocket, then almost furtively put it back. But he shook his head at Walt's proffered tobacco and went cane-thumping back to his rocker on the porch. Linda followed with a pill and a cup of water.

"Well, thanks for the chuck," said Walt.

He went down to the corral, saddled the dun horse, and rode away.

AT SUNUP THE NEXT MORNING he was nailing on a brace to take the sag out of the main corral gate. He still didn't have a hammer, but he had found a better rock. A decent interval after he saw smoke curl from the chimney, he knocked on the kitchen door. From the lack of surprise on Linda's face he knew she had already seen him through the window. Hat over his heart, Walt put on a mighty meek look.

"Well, doggone!" he said. "I must have got lost and rode in a circle!"

"Like fun," said Linda.

"Ain't this the ranch without a hammer—where the freckle-faced cook makes lumpy gravy?"

"It wasn't lumpy! And here's a hammer. Do you suppose if I hit you over the head with it you'd go away?"

"Not till after breakfast," grinned Walt.

"It will be ready by the time you carry a turn of water and wash up!" Linda handed him two buckets and

closed the door too quickly for him to decide about the smile.

Walt found the spring off a piece from the house and noted that it needed a new box and dredging out.

Jeff Kincannon nodded shortly to him when he came to the table, then bowed his head.

"O Lord," he prayed, "we ask thy grace—to bless the absent one this day and make easy his heart!"

Except for stewed prunes instead of corn, the meal was the same as yesterday's. It was not in the cowboy's heart to speak disrespectfully, but the solemn silence made him uneasy, and he had always lived among cowfolks who could stand a little joshing, even about a serious matter.

"If I was a professor back in Missouri," he said, batting tentative eyes toward the girl, "it'd make me mighty proud to have somebody prayin' for me 'way out here in New Mexico this early in the mornin'!"

Sudden tears in Linda's brown eyes and the look of tight-lipped anguish on Jeff's weathered face made him wish he had kept his mouth shut.

"Jim Clark didn't tell you?" asked Linda quietly.

Walt started to say "Didn't tell me what?" but caught himself. "Clark told me this place needed a cowhand about my size and shape. That's how come I'm here. About that prayer, I sure didn't aim to—"

"Let's not talk about it," said Linda and went to fetch the coffeepot.

"Mr. Kincannon—" Walt was willing to change the subject—"has some outfit that brands Rafter S got a lease on J Bar K grass?"

"They sure ain't!" Kincannon said it almost venomously. "Them low-down—"

"Pa!" broke in the girl, returning from the kitchen. "It's no use to get all worked up about it. You'll just bring on another spell with your heart!"

"Dadblame my heart!" The old cowman pounded a scrawny fist on the table. Then, as suddenly as it had flared up, all the fire seemed to die out of him. "How come *you* askin', Finley?"

"I done a little ridin' yesterday. Some purty fair grass. Saw a few J Bar K's—and a lot of Rafter S's. Also some down fence. I choused out some Rafter S's and patched up what I could. Figgered I might as well earn my gravy."

"You just as well forget it," shrugged Kincannon. "It ain't no use any more."

Walt went on out without further comment. He had Rawhide ready to ride when Linda came out with some cold biscuits tied up in an old flour sack.

"You might not hit a good stop for dinner," she said.

"You sound like you thought I was goin' someplace!"

"Well, aren't you?"

"Linda," said Walt, "I sort of like it here."

"Mr. Finley, are—are you working for the bank?"

"I'm workin' for the J Bar K," said Walt. "And thanks for the biscuits."

He stuffed them in a saddlebag already bulging with staples, hammer, and fence pliers.

"I purt' near wish I'd run onto this job before you went off to school," he said from up in the saddle.

"Mr. Finley—"

"I'd be half a mind to—"

"Mr. Finley, I—"

Walt swung the corral gate wide. "Leave it open. I might come back in too big a hurry to jump it!"

"*Mr. Finley! Will you please listen*

to me a minute!"

"Yes, ma'am," said the cowboy. "'Specially if you could throw in a smile!"

"Mr. Finley, the plain truth is that we're broke—flat. Pa doesn't even own the J Bar K any more—really. The Stockman's Bank in Twinrock holds a mortgage on everything—and for more than it's worth, with power of attorney to sell it whenever and for whatever they please. That's why we don't feel like you ought to—"

"I wonder," Walt broke in solemnly, "if professors like gravy?"

"Mr. Finley, I think you're crazy!"

"If I ain't," grinned the cowboy, whirling his horse to ride away, "all I need is a little push!"

THE CORRAL GATE WAS OPEN when he drove in a dozen J Bar K horses by moonlight late that night. There was a lighted lantern in the gear shed with a note stuck under it: *Coffeepot on. Biscuits in warming oven. You don't have to sleep in the stable, darn it. Room next to the kitchen.*

It was unsigned, but the script, Walt noted, was as dainty as a snowbird track.

He came in to breakfast from shoeing a horse the next morning with an armload of wood.

"You slip in and out of a house mighty quiet," said Linda.

"Part wildcat," grinned Walt, but said no more throughout breakfast, not even when he saw Jeff Kincannon watching him roll a smoke.

Walt rode a J Bar K horse that day. He had a speckled yearling down and was examining the Rafter S brand on its hip when two men rode up behind him. One of them was a sparse-built cowboy with reddish hair and shifty eyes. The other was a bulky man of forty-odd, with a round, ruddy face and thick black mustache. The latter spoke abruptly, without greeting:

"Anything about that brand that don't suit you, stranger?"

"Not to speak of. I was just curious how a Rafter S yearling would happen to look so much like a J Bar K cow I saw yesterday."

"And I'm curious to know how come your rope's on one of my calves?"

"My name's Finley, big Shorty," said Walt. "I'm ridin' for the J Bar K—and ropin' what I please on that brand's property."

"Well, that's one way of lookin' at it," shrugged the big man. "Ridin' for the J Bar K, huh? Bank hire you?"

"I see you've got an inquirin' mind," said Walt.

"I happen to know Jeff Kincannon can't pay a hand, cowboy!"

"Maybe he's gone in the goose business since you saw him," grinned Walt. "Gold eggs."

The big man obliged with a chuckle that had no mirth in it. "I won't beat around the bush, Finley. The Stockman's Bank has got this place up for sale to satisfy a mortgage, and I—"

"So Miss Kincannon told me."

"Did, huh? Did she tell you ol' Jeff went broke tryin' to save a cow-thief son from the pen—even after it was proved he'd been stealin' from his own daddy's outfit to pay for his high life? Did she—"

"I don't like a waggin' tongue, buster," Walt broke in drily. He stooped to turn the calf loose.

"All right, all right! But I'll tell you—I'm Vern Seaton. I own the Rafter S, and I'm aimin' to buy this J Bar K as soon as Jim Clark gets his price down to what such a gone-to-hell ranch is

worth. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," suggested Walt, "it makes you as happy as a hog in a corn-patch to find Kincannon's got a man tryin' to put it in a little better shape for you!"

"Like hell!" laughed the rusty-haired puncher.

"I'll do the talkin', Colorow," said Seaton sharply. "It stands to reason, Finley, that I ain't fond of seein' anything done on the J Bar K that might hold the price up. But I'm a reasonable man, and you look like a cowhand that could use some wages. Come on over to the Rafter S and I'll pay you forty a month. Maybe a chance to ramrod this place when I get it bought. What you say, cowboy?"

Walt took his time about getting on his horse.

"What I say, Seaton," he drawled, without the grin, "is that there's times when it might pay for a man to stay on his own side of the fence!"

"You *could* get too smart for them patched britches, Finley! I ain't a man to fool with!"

Without answering, Walt rode deliberately away—and nobody followed.

"*Lord, bless the absent one this day and make easy his heart. . . .*"

The words of a broken old man's breakfast prayer kept trailing through Walt Finley's mind, laying a heaviness of pity on his heart.

From a hilltop, toward sundown, he sighted an adobe shack beside thin tracks of a road about a mile outside the J Bar K fence and rode to it. A crude sign over the door said:

SACATON N MEX POSTOFFICE STORE.

From the spare Spanish postmistress he bought what few supplies he could carry on his saddle: a few pinto beans, dry salt pork, coffee, flour, prunes, sugar—and two packages of pipe tobacco. When he mentioned the J Bar K, the *mujer* handed him two letters addressed to Linda Kincannon, one to her father. It shamed Walt a little that he could not help noticing that although one of Linda's letters bore a Missouri postmark, the name on its return address was a girl's. Both the other letters were from a noncommittal box number in Santa Fe, such as penitentiaries often use for the correspondence of their inmates.

LINDA KINCANNON LOOKED UP from her biscuit making with a smile that turned to distress when she saw the groceries.

"When I said we were broke I didn't mean we were starving, Mr. Finley!" she said stiffly. "You certainly don't have to—"

"Hold your horses, womanfolks! I told them to charge this stuff to the J Bar K. And here's some letters—or ain't I supposed to carry *them*, either?"

"I'm sorry," said Linda. "Thank you."

Without stopping to wipe the flour from her hands, she took the letters in where old Jeff sat by the fireplace, closing the door behind her.

Walt had the groceries stowed away, biscuits in the oven, meat on frying, and was putting beans to soak for tomorrow's pot by the time Linda came back in. He tried not to notice that she had been crying a little, nor to wonder whether it was because of letters that *had* come, or maybe one that had not. But he was glad that she forgot to "Mister" him.

"Gosh, Walt Finley!" she scolded. "You don't have to do *everything* around here!"

"A cowpoke that can't cook is like a hog that can't root," he smiled, and

went out after water.

Even by moonlight he saw that the spring had been dredged out clean and neatly re-boxed since that morning. He wondered whether Linda or the old man had done it. But it didn't matter. It was the sort of thing neither of them had had the heart to do before he came.

When Walt rode up from the corral after breakfast the next morning, leading a second saddled horse, the old man in the rocker was puffing gently on a pipe, his dingy black hat back off his eyes. He grinned a faint, sheepish grin, but neither man said anything about where the tobacco might have come from.

"Nice mornin', Jeff," said Walt. "Maybe you'd like to ride with me?"

"I ain't able," Kincannon shook his head. "An' even if I was—"

"I could use some help on a few big calves I was figgerin' to brand. Of course, if it would be too hard on your ticker—"

"Dadblame my ticker!" Kincannon got up from his chair almost spryly. "You ain't obliged to try an' tail up this outfit, but if you've got your neck bowed to do it, I'm goin' to help you—if it kills me!"

He was up in the saddle when Linda came out. "Why, Pa!" she cried.

"Sometimes horse ridin'," said Walt, "is good for the heart trouble."

"Pa," said Linda, mingled anxiety and pleasure in her brown eyes, "I won't let you ride unless I'm along!"

"Then get your pants on," said Walt sternly. "I've saddled a horse for you!"

Maybe it wasn't the kind of cow work three competent cowhands would have put on, but among them they got a dozen big calves branded, and after they rode tired horses in at twilight, Jeff Kincannon astonished his daughter by carrying in an armload of wood.

Helping with the supper dishes, Walt could smell the fragrance of pipe tobacco floating in from the porch, and twice he heard Linda humming bits of an old cowboy song over the dishpan.

"Linda," he began as he hung up his dish towel, "there's a matter on my mind that—"

"Please, Walt!" she broke in, laying an impulsive hand on his arm. "Not tonight!"

Undressing that night, Walt rubbed his left arm where the girl's hand had rested. It made him feel good.

For a couple more days Linda rode with them. After that she let old Jeff go with Walt alone. They found some fences they had repaired cut again and a lot of Rafter S cattle where they didn't belong. They choused them out and were fixing fence when Vern Seaton and two cowboys rode up. Walt saw Jeff Kincannon's face go white. Seaton ignored the old man's presence.

"Finley," he said harshly, "I don't like what's goin' on around here!"

"Then lump it," said Walt.

"I warned you," said Seaton, "about gettin' too smart for your britches!"

With that the three men whirled abruptly and galloped away.

"I'll kill him!" Kincannon looked drawn and shaky.

"Take it easy, Jeff," said Walt.

Riding a rocky draw not far from the Rafter S line late that afternoon, both men reined up suddenly at the sound of rifle shots.

"Somebody shootin' at a coyote," shrugged Walt.

But he had heard the whine of bullets glancing off a rock a few yards above the trail and knew that he wasn't fooling Jeff Kincannon. What he might

have tried to do about it alone was one thing. What he aimed to do about it with a heart-ailing old man along was quite another.

"Nice neighbors we've got!" growled Kincannon. "Dadblame it, let's go git him!"

Walt saw that the old man's face was as pale as a weathered wagonsheet, his thin hands shaking.

"Forget it, Jeff," he said shortly. "Anybody that meant business wouldn't shoot that high."

Halfway home Kincannon turned in his saddle. "Don't say nothin' to Linda."

Walt nodded.

The next morning Jeff Kincannon had one of his "spells" right after breakfast, and Linda would not let him try to ride.

In the days that followed, Walt found no more fences down, and no more bullets from unseen rifles whined over his head. But he did find four big calves with fresh J Bar K brands following Rafter S cows. He roped two of them and studied the brands carefully.

He knew this was no mistake of his. That it was groundwork for a frame-up he had little doubt, and an urge to ride to the Rafter S for a showdown welled up strong in him. But with life just beginning to take on a more cheerful aspect at the J Bar K, he hated to open up fresh trouble right now that might spoil it. For a while yet he would keep his mouth shut about the misbranded calves. But a day would come.

Meantime he went on with the thousand and one jobs that needed doing—and wore his six-shooter.

It was little short of miraculous what even two weeks of good hard work could do for a gone-to-hell ranch.

On the morning that Walt Finley decided to ride into Twinrock on certain business he had in mind, both at the bank and the sheriff's office, he had the Rawhide horse already saddled before he noticed a loose shoe. He led the horse around to the north-side shade of the house to tighten it. Probably it was his hammering that kept him from hearing the approach of horsemen around in front.

The first he knew of their presence was the booming voice of Vern Seaton raised in anger:

"You're lyin', Kincannon! I saw him skulk out behind the house as we come over the hill. Come on, boys, let's go get the damn cow thief!"

Walt came around the corner just in time to see four armed horsemen get headed off by a scrawny little old man and a slender girl in flowered calico. Old Jeff's only weapon was his cane, Linda's an upraised broom.

"Ain't no dadblamed trumped-up posse goin' to arrest nobody on these premises!" Kincannon was saying.

Outwardly as casual as a cowhand called to dinner, inwardly as nerve-taut as the strings of a freshly tuned fiddle, Walt stepped out to face the four riders—bulky Vern Seaton, the cowboy called Colorow, and two others.

"Here he is!" boomed Seaton. "Batson, speak your piece!"

"I'm a deputy sheriff." The cowboy next to Seaton sounded like a schoolboy reciting a memorized speech. "You're under arrest, Finley, for cattle stealin'—namely, burnin' J Bar K on Rafter S calves. I'd advise you to surrender in peace!"

"Jeff," said Walt without turning his head, "you and Linda go in the house."

They didn't go. Even at such a moment it tickled Walt a little to note the threatening angle of Linda's uplifted broom.

"You spoke your piece purty, Mr. Batson," he said, imitating the cowboy's stilted manner. "Would you be kind enough to show me your commission as an officer?"

"He ain't no more a dadblamed officer than I am!" snorted old Jeff.

It was Seaton himself who answered for the phony deputy.

"Never mind the palaver! You comin' with us, Finley? Or have we got to take you?"

"Shame, Vern Seaton!" cried Linda. "Do you think we've forgotten—"

"Hush, Linda," broke in Walt quietly.

He stalked slowly across in front of the lined-up horsemen, the arm of his gun hand arched out ever so little from his body, talking in a voice as flat as any dry plank in the porch.

"All right, boys, who's got openers? You, Batson? You, Colorow? You, Seaton? It's your party, ain't it?"

"Finley," Seaton growled uneasily, "I warn you you're resisting arrest."

Eight wary eyes followed Walt's movements as if hypnotized. Not a hand moved toward a gun.

"What?" said Walt pleasantly. "Nobody ready to die for good ol' Tailholt County?"

"Git!" Kincannon exploded suddenly in his age-rusty voice. "Off my premises!"

"*Your* premises?" Seaton's laugh had a taunt in it. "Hell, Kincannon, don't you know this *hombre* sneaked into the bank and bought this place out from under you?"

"That'll do, Seaton!" Walt stopped walking. For two or three hard, tight seconds death for somebody lurked in the sudden silence. It was Seaton who broke it.

"We won't start no shootin' with a woman present, Finley," he growled. "Come on, boys, we can 'tend to this later!"

But as Seaton made as if to rein his horse around, Walt saw his big hand drop to his gun. Linda must have seen the treachery too. In the hundredth of a second before two shots roared out, her hurled broom struck Seaton's startled horse on the rump.

Seaton's bullet ripped a leg of Walt Finley's Levi's. But Walt's own shot hit exactly where it was aimed. With no sound but the thud of its own falling, Vern Seaton's bulky body toppled out of the saddle to the ground.

Walt's forty-five stayed up, ready for the next one. That he did not have to shoot again was ironic testimony to the kind of loyalty a man like Seaton could command from rangeland riff-raff. Alive, the boss. Dead, a carcass in which they had lost all interest. Colorow's gun-reach reversed itself as if from a rattlesnake.

"Vern's a goner, boys!" he yelled hoarsely. "Let's git outa here!"

It was advice that Batson and the other cowboy seemed not to need. Three hired badmen of limited valor whirled their horses and sped away, Seaton's loose horse following.

"I'll git my thirty-thirty!" cried old Jeff, and ran for the house, only to sit down suddenly on the edge of the porch, one scrawny hand clutching the shirt over his heart.

Now that it was over, Linda was near to crying, and Walt's own hands were shaky as he picked up the girl's broom.

"You made a mighty good throw, womanfolks," he said. "God, I hate to kill a man!"

"You had to—and this one deserved it! Oh, Walt—you're hurt!"

"I've been scratched worse fixin'

bobwire fence," said the cowboy. "You'd better take Jeff in the house. I'll get a wheelbarrow and put Seaton in the saddleshed till we can send for the sheriff."

The chore took him some time. When he came back to the house Linda was putting things in an old open trunk in the dining-room. Walt stared at the tight-lipped look on her face.

"We won't stay here on charity!" she burst out. "Why didn't you tell us you'd *bought* the place?"

"I hadn't." Walt spoke soberly. "I took an option to buy—if it suited me. I figgered the best way to sure-'nough look it over would be to let on that I was a busted cowpoke out of a job. Now I've got myself in a fix!"

The girl's expression softened a little. "But it was self-defense, Walt! You couldn't help—"

"I don't mean the killin'. They'd have thrown me in a gully someplace if I'd let 'em take me. There *was* a J Bar K brand on some Rafter S calves, all right, but *not* burned with *our* stamp iron. It was a frame-up of Seaton's to get me out of the way, so he could finish crowdin' out a sick man and a woman.

"I aimed to report the whole business to the sheriff today. I still do. But with the main stemwinder dead, our neighbor troubles will peter out mighty quick. And I ain't worried but what I'll come clear on the killin'. The fix *I'm* in is something else. I had no business foolin' you and Jeff about what I was here for, but—" the cowboy hesitated, a wry grin showing through his earnestness—"but when I came here I didn't know I was goin' to fall in love!"

Linda straightened from folding a dress in the trunk and faced him, the gaze of her deep brown eyes clear and direct.

"There was something we should have told you, too. My brother is in prison—for cattle stealing!"

"I know, Linda. I figgered we might make the J Bar K a good place for him to come back to."

"But he—he's guilty, Walt! He got mixed up with Seaton, and they made him the goat, and he's in prison, and I can't let a man like you come here and—"

Something in her eyes must have made Walt Finley suddenly realize the futility of further talk.

What Jeff Kincannon saw, then, from the doorway, prompted him to tiptoe back to his bedroom with the stuff he was bringing out to pack, and leave it there.

After a moment the comforting tightness of the cowboy's long arms abruptly relaxed. "Gosh, I forgot!" he exclaimed, pretending more alarm than he felt. "What about that professor, honey-folks?"

"Oh, him!" smiled Linda Kincannon, and let him kiss her again.

Curly Bill's anticipated million-buck leg-I-see from his Uncle Coot is imperiled by the Fishman quadrupeds and the Demon Rum.

Sam's Son and Delighted

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn by Walker A. Tompkins

WHENEVER LEW PIRTLE comes busting out of his Overland Telegrapht office like his britches was afire—providing his wife Myrtle ain't urgin' him along with a broomstick—people in Apache know somebody hereabouts has received a wire for Lew to deliver. Such a stirring event happens on a average of onct ever six months.

This particular one, Lew skids to a halt in front of the Bloated Goat Saloon, ketches his breath, and struts inside to find the usual quorum of menfolks roundsiding over their beers.

"I taken a tellygrum offn the wire," Pirtle pants proud, "addressed to a Mister William Q. Grane of this city."

Bartender Curly Bill Grane wipes his hands on his bar rag and says, "That's me!" just as if Lew ain't known him going on thirty year.

"Ain't so shore!" Pirtle protests polite. "Says here, 'Wm. Q. Grane, *Proprietor O.K. Mercantile Store, Apache, Ariz. Terr.*'"

Sol Fishman, who owns the O.K. Mercantile and therefore fits the address, hollers, "Then it's for me, Lew. Fork it over!"

Sol makes a grab for the telegram, but Pirtle won't leggo. Claims it's his bounden duty to make shore confidential messages ain't misdelivered. This tug-of-war don't do the telegram flimsy any good, so finally they decide to call in a neuter referee who'll read the damn thing and decide who it's for, impartial.

Anyhow. The only hombre Curly Bill and Sol can agree on is Justin

Other Smith, the young artist they call the Paintin' Pistoleer on account of him bein' the champeen pistol west of the Pecos.

Smith happent to be in the saloon at the time, for his midafternoon snort of buttermilk. So Lew Pirtle hands him the tore-up telegram, and after Justin O. has patched the pieces together, he says:

"Can't tell from the text just *who* it's for, gents. But it don't sound important, so I'll read it out loud: ARRIVING 5:17 TODAY ON BORDER EXPRESS TO VISIT BETWEEN TRAINS. UNCLE COOT."

Well, Sol don't appear to savvy this message; but Curly Bill's eyeballs roll up in their sprockets, he makes a noise like the wind leakin' from a punctured balloon, and then he quietly folds up behint the bar in a cold faint. The wire must of been for him.

Doc Sigmoid Grubb is on hand, and sober, by some miracle. So he applies artificial perspiration. Durin' all the cornfusion, old Ache-in-the-Back, the chief of the Cheery-cow Injun Reservate, drains ever glass he finds abandoned on the bar, working up such a toot that his squaw, Flushing Waters, has to tote him home, and she vows to have Curly Bill arrested for sellin' likker to a Injun.

When Curly Bill finally revives, he moans miserable, "That Coot hombre is my uncle, all right. The millionaire one who cleant up a fortune peddlin' his patent medicine called Young Man's Fancy Spring Tonic. I'll inherit his fortune if I ain't married when he passes on, me bein' his sole heir."

Folks blink at each other. For years they been hearing Curly Bill brag about his rich relate, Cootberg J. Grane, who started out with a medicine-show wagon, selling snakebite cure, and wound up with a factory. The medicine show has growed into the world-famous Grane Wild Animal Circus, and Uncle Coot is now a philanderpuss, doing good deeds all over the U.S.A. with his surplus dinero.

"Why so glum, Curly Bill?" inquires Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge. "They's no danger of you gittin' married and losin' yore legacy. O' course, here in Apache a between-train visit means two weeks—but what the burnt-out old heck? Ifn *I* had a millionaire relate—"

Curly Bill is so terrified he can hardly pour hisself a bracer.

"You don't onderstand the die-lemmy I'm in," he moans. "You see, in addition to havin' aversions to matrimony, Uncle Coot is dead-sot agin alcohol in any form. He is presidunt of the Boston Brotherhood for the Banishment of Breweries, founder of the Anti-Liquor League, and runs for presidunt ever election on the Bone-dry ticket. Only thing he hates worse than weddin's is saloonkeepers."

The boys begin to wise up now why Bill is so flusterated.

"You see," Grane goes on to explain, "the two reasons why I am Uncle Coot's bennyfishalary is because I am a bachelor, and also the only son of his twin brother Sam, deceased. And Uncle Coot thinks I run a respectable mercantile business—not a saloon."

"How come?" asks the Paintin' Pistoleer, simplethetic.

"Well," Curly Bill says, "Uncle Coot knows when I fust come to 'Pache I run the O.K. Mercantile. But I sold out to Sol twenty year ago after I won this Bloated Goat Saloon in a poker game. I just never got around to lettin' Uncle Coot know I'd changed my perfession, when he was poor. Now I dassn't to or

he'll disown me."

Sol Fishman savvies now why the telegram come addressed to his store. He likewise has a glimmering of what Curly Bill is up against. Because when Cootberg J. lands in Apache for the first time, and discovers his pet nephew tends bar, he'll disinherit Bill quicker than the devil could poach a polecat.

"Uncle Coot is past ninety," Bill mourns. "It's plumb offal to think of that fortune slippin' out of my hands, jest because I quit storekeepin' and turned to bartendin' twenty-odd year ago."

Well, as usual, when Apache folks git in a jam, they turn to the Paintin' Pistoleer for advice and assistance. But it don't seem possible for even a genius as clever as Justin Other Smith that Uncle Coot, once he lands in 'Pache, can be kept in iggorance of his nephew's real station in the community, a lowbrow bartender. But Justin O. cuddles his brains for a few minutes and comes up with a desprit last-resort scheme to save Curly Bill's inheritance.

"It's a risky thing," Smith admits, right off. "But if everbody will co-operate it can be done. My idea is this. While Uncle Coot is in town, Curly Bill must swap identities with Sol Fishman. Curly must stay out of sight here in the saloon—if Uncle Coot hates likker as much as you say he does, it's a cinch he won't come snoopin' around inside this barroom."

"That's right," Curly Bill agrees, perting up some.

"Sol Fishman will have the big job, posing as Curly Bill for the duration of Uncle Coot's visit," the Paintin' Pistoleer goes on to say. "The whole community has got to pretend that the O.K. Mercantile is still Curly Bill's store, and Curly Bill is our most ardent prohibitionist."

That was so far-fetched, even Smith has to laugh.

"Anyway," he says, "with a million dollars at stake, we got to keep Curly's occupation a secret. Uncle Coot will depart with his faith in his nephew unimpaired, and that legacy will be safe against the sad day when Uncle Coot goes to his reward."

Well, Sol Fishman is leary about swapping names with Curly Bill, but he finally gives in after receiving a bribe involving a year's supply of Blue Bagpipe whisky at the Bloated Goat. But the scheme will require some mighty hard work to put over, not the least of the problems being to change the big name signs posted on the false fronts of the saloon and mercantile respectably. And less than three hours to do this in, and wise up the town as to what's what.

The Paintin' Pistoleer hikes over to his art studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, and gets busy on the signs. He rips a nice weatherbeat board offn the fence behind Dyspepsia Dan's Feedbag Cafe, and paints on it the sign SOLOMON FISHMAN, OWNER AND BARTENDER. This board is hustled over to the Bloated Goat before the paint is dry, and Sheriff Rimfire Cudd helps Curly Bill h'ist it up onto the saloon porch and nail it under the Bloated Goat Saloon sign so it covers up the original letters which spell out *Curly Bill Grane, Prop. & Bartender.*

Then the Paintin' Pistoleer rigs up a scaffolding and gets busy with his paintbrush altering the O.K. Mercantile's sign to say WILLIAM GRANE'S O.K. MERCANTILE STORE & POST-OFFICE. It's a tribute to Smith's art ability that when he has finished the

new sign, it looks as faded and weather-beat as ifn it had been erected twenty years ago when Curly Bill really owned the place.

All this frantic sign-switching takes time, though, so it's past five o'clock and the smoke on the oncomin' Border Express passenger train is on the horizon when Smith gits his ladders and scaffolding taken down.

Then he realizes that everbody in town has got to be let in on the plot, so folks won't say "Howdy, Sol!" or "Good mornin', Mister Fishman, any mail for me?" when they meet the storekeeper and postmaster who is supposed to be Uncle Coot's nephew Willy.

To take care of this Paul Revere assignment, Justin O. Smith hires young Pootie Coddlewort to rattle his hocks around town warning people that for the next two weeks, Curly Bill Grane and Sol Fishman are swapping brands, with a million bucks at stake. Young Pootie is to get paid ten cents a head for everbody he warns, and he gets busy right away spreading the news of this scheme Smith has scum up.

There's a tol'able big crowd waiting at the 'Pache depot when the Express stops, for the first time in recorded history, to let a passenger off. Said passenger proves to be a droopy-mustached little yahoo in a stovepipe hat and frock coat, as shriveled up as a Gypsum mummy. This is Uncle Coot, all right, because he gets busy passing out handbills reading BUY DR. COOTBERG J. GRANE'S YOUNG MEN'S FANCY SPRING TONIC! CURES THE ILLS OF MAN AND BEAST!

Coot is the spittin' image of how Curly Bill will look forty years from now—the same watery eyes, purple nose, and clift chin.

"My name," the newcomer says in a pipsqueaky voice, "is Dr. Cootberg Josephus Grane. I have a nephew, William, residing in this city, owner of the O.K. Mercantile store. He is my late brother Samuel's son and heir apparently to my extensive estate."

Sol Fishman, who Smith has coached careful on what to do, is on hand all bibbed and tuckered out in Doc Grubb's buryin' suit. Curly Bill, of course, is lying low in his saloon, knowing he dassn't show hisself in public or Uncle Coot would recognize him as a blood relate for shore. The big bluff is ready to begin.

Sol hobbles over and sticks out his hand. "I'm Sam's son, and delighted to meet you after all these y'ars," he recites.

Uncle Coot hauls out a pair of nose glasses and sizes up Sol suspicious. Sol is on the far side of seventy and shows it.

"Nephew Willy," Uncle Coot says ominoose, "for a man of forty-five you appear to have dissipated a great deal. You aren't addicted to sewing wild oaks like your father Samuel before you, are you?"

Sol rares up plumb insulky. Although he's got so much redeye on his breath it would of been plumb arsonous for him to have lit a cigar, he says dignified, "*Me* drink spirits, Uncle? I am ashamed you'd even imply same. Booze? I never touch the stuff."

Uncle Coot grins with relief, his one tooth sticking out like a tombstone in a plowed field. He looks over the assembled Apache-ites with his nose high as a turkey's tail, then takes Sol by the arm and they hobble off toward Main Street. When Uncle Coot ketches sight of the Bloated Goat Saloon—"Solomon Fishman, Owner and Bartender"—he gets his back up like a tomcat.

"Before I leave town, Nephew Willy," he snorts, "you can be assured I will have taken drastic steps to padlock that den of iniquity yonder. Whoever this Solomon Fishman may be, I take it for granite he is a scoundrel and a discredit to your community."

Sol cusses under his breath, but the Paintin' Pistoleer is hoverin' handy to make sure Uncle Coot is prodded on down the street toward the O.K. Mercantile and safer ground.

Before they can get past the Bloated Goat, though, a gust of wind scuttles in offn the desert and rattles the town, and a big board comes clatterin' down offn the saloon porch and comes within a ace of bashing Uncle Coot's head in, in which case Curly Bill would have been a rich man on the spot.

This board is the sign bearing Sol Fishman's name, and up to now has covered up Curly Bill's name on the saloon front. Now, the whole town realizes if Uncle Coot so much as glances upward he will see his favor-ite nephew's name painted plumb acrost the saloon gable, and the fat will be in the fire for shore.

Uncle Coot's attention has got to be kept earthward at all costs. The Paintin' Pistoleer rises to the emergency by flopping flat on his face at Coot's feet and rolls around like a loony tick.

"An elliptical seizure," speaks up Doc Grubb, ketching on fast. "This unfortunate rannihan throws a fit ever so often. Sol, uh!—Curly Bill, why don't you take yore uncle to the store?"

Well, they manage to get Uncle Coot steered on down the street until he ketches sight of the O.K. Mercantile. Uncle Coot swells up like a pigeon as he spots Curly Bill's name on the gable.

"Excellent! Excellent!" he corngratulates Sol. "A business worthy of anyone name of Grane. Before I leave I will write you a blank check so you can rebuild this shack with brick and marble."

When they reach the O.K. steps, Uncle Coot spies the famous checker game which has been going on for the past two-three months between Lord Delpus, the rich Englishman, and Crowfoot Hoskins, the hotel man. Delpus has got Hoskins backed into a tight corner. The outcome of this game has had Apache in a lather for weeks now.

Well, as Uncle Coot stops to size up the board, young Pootie Coddlewort rips around the corner and yells at Delpus and Crowfoot in a voice that would carry to Mexico City: "FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS BILL GRANE IS SWAPPING NAMES WITH SOL FISHMAN TO SAVE HISSELF A MILLION BUCKS!!! Which makes a dollar-thirty I've earn't so far." With which Pootie goes hotfooting away to earn hisself another dime, leaving everbody stunned, knowing the hoax is exposed now.

But either Uncle Coot is a mite deef, or else has a one-crack mind. Because all he does is reach down to move a checker for Crowfoot, who ain't made a move since eight p.m. Tuesday a week. This assistance plumb ruins Lord Delpus's checker-championship hopes.

"I say, old fellow," he gasps, "wasn't that a bit precipitate?"

"Don't thank me—I invented the game," Uncle Coot insists. "Now Willy, inside the store. I want to see how orderly you are."

Sol Fishman shudders. Crowfoot looks like he wants to murder Uncle Coot, and Sol wishes he would. His store allus looks like a boar's nest. But Uncle Coot's bad impression melts away pronto when he discovers a stock

of his Young Man's Fancy Spring Tonic racked up between the coffee mill and the barrel of buggy whips.

"A fine display of my product," Coot beams. "But—what's *this?* You've marked it '85% discount for quick clearance'?!"

Luckily they is a customer waiting, who comes to Fishman's aid. Same being Missus Coddlewort's girl Smegma, who is taking keer of Sol's thirteen-month-old quadruplets—little boy Moe and his sisters Eenie, Menie, and Miney. Their mother, Prunelly, is at a meeting of the Ladies' Knittin' & Peach Presarves Society this afternoon, which is how come Smeggie is riding herd on the four babies. Sol, though, would just as soon they weren't in sight.

Smeggie, having been warned by Pootie, comes through with flyin' colors in this emergency by saying, "Howdy, *Mr. Grane. Mr. Grane,* I want to buy two yards of that calico, *Mr. Grane.*"

Well, Uncle Coot is staring frawg-eyed at these quadrupeds in their four tandem-hitched buggies. His amazement bein' due to the fact that each tike is the spit & image of their father—they each got Sol's bat ears, squint eyes, and two-toothed grins. And as if this wasn't bad enough under the circumstances, all four ketch sight of Sol and start yellin', "Poppa! Poppa! Poppa! Poppa!"

Uncle Coot says to Smeggie in a voice boding weevil to somebody, "And just *who* are these infants calling their Papa, Miss?"

Sol makes desprit signals behint Uncle Coot's back, but Smeggie is near-sighted, and also should of had her head bored for the simples long ago, for she says proud, "Why, their Daddy is standing right beside you, sir. Mister Fish—er! Mister *Grane,* that is."

Cootberg J. Grane snorts ominoose. Sol has turned as green around the gills as he did the time he picked up a coil of lass' rope offn the street and discovered it was a live rattlesnake.

"HARUMPH!" Uncle Coot coughs. "In view of my attitude toward wholly matrimony, Nephew Willy, I believe I know why you kept me in ignorance of this change in your bachelordom. *Married,* eh?"

"No!" Sol screams frantic. "I mean, ifn I'd of got hitched—which I wouldn't of—I'd of named my first-bornt after you. Now you looky here, Smeggie. Quit joshin' my Uncle Coot. Tell him those four ugly brats ain't no kith ner kin o' mine, understand?"

Smeggie Coddlewort is shocked and outraged. She says, "Why, Mister Fish—Mister Grane, I mean—are you denyin' these ain't your younguns? What will Prunelly say when she hears *that?*"

Sol is too bogged down to back out now. He sends Smeggie and her baby wagon train skedaddling. And Smeggie heads acrost the street to the lodge hall to report to Missus Fishman that the father of her babies has gone plumb besmirk.

Sol figgers his time has come when Uncle Coot turns on him and hisses, "Nephew Willy, if you have been guilty of an indiscretion, I will cut you out of my will without a red nickel. There are other evils almost as deplorable as alcoholism! But to get back to more important matters—why is it I find you pricing my tonic 'for quick clearance' at below cost?"

Sol is glad to get the subject turned offn them younglings who look just like him. He says, "Uncle Coot, yore tonic is so popular with Stirrup County customers, I can make a profit selling it below wholesale because of such a

rapid stock turnover!"

Uncle Coot smirks, flattered as all get-out. Ain't long, though, before a ruction explodes out front. Sol *knows* the end is near when he gits a glimpse of his wife Prunelly stalkin' acrost the street with Hernia Groot. Prunelly is toting a buggy axle and screeching at the top of her lungs.

"Sol's denyin' the paternity of his own offsprings, is he? Why, when I git finished with him Sol won't be fit for dog meat!"

Lucky for Sol, Uncle Coot is over behint the counter taking inventory on the stock of his patent medicine, anyway he pays no tension to Prunelly outside. And the Paintin' Pistoleer has come to Sol's aid by blocking the door while he explains the setup to Sol's infuriated spouse. It's plumb doubtful, though, how long Justin O. can hold out agin a she-blister as mad as Prunelly is.

After Uncle Coot has refreshed hisself with a shot of his tonic, he makes a speech. "Nephew Willy, as you know, my main crusade in life is to rid every city and hamlet in these United States of their saloon menace. I do this by the simple process of buying out every saloon I see. Pay such high prices the bartenders can't turn me down. With the stipulate, o' course, that they never spend a penny of my money to go into the likker trade again. Before I pass on, I hope to make this commonwealth of ours as dry as the Sohairy Desert."

Sol knows a disaster is brewing here that will make his wife's temper seem like nothing, but Sol don't have a chance to wedge a word in with this crusader who's supposed to be his uncle.

"Therefore," Cootberg J. goes on, "my first objective, during my brief visit in Apache, is to call on this inebriate Solomon Fishman, at that saloon down the street, the name of which saloon is too vulgar to pass my lips. You will escort me to the offending establishment and interduce me to this Fishman miscreant. Now."

Sol is fixing to faint. "Uncle Coot," he begs piteous, "you can't ask me to set foot inside of that place. We would disgrace the proud fambly name. Why, for the past twenty year I've passed the Bloated Goat on t'other side of the street."

But Uncle Coot don't see it thataway. "If one tilts lances with the devil," he says, "one must badger him in his own den. Very well, Nephew Willy, I will invade Fishman's barroom alone."

Before Sol can lift a finger to stop him, the little galoot heads out the door with righteous blood in his eye. He tips his stovepipe hat to Hernia and Prunelly and goes stalkin' down the street toward the Bloated Goat as grim and fierce as one of the Four Horsemen of the Puckered Lips the scriptures tell about.

The Paintin' Pistoleer, who's had his hands full keeping Prunelly from going after Sol hammer and tongues, realizes this situation is fast getting out of control when he sees Uncle Coot go busting into the Bloated Goat barroom like a brimmer bull.

Deserting pore Sol to his wife's mercy, Justin O. sprints down the street toward the saloon, prayin' that Curly Bill was forewarned in time to sneak out the back way.

But his prayers are without a veil. When Smith ducks into the barroom he finds the saloon crowd in a state of suspendered animation. Curly Bill and Uncle Coot are glarin' at each other acrost the bar, noses together like two

gamecocks. It's like a man lookin' at hisself in a mirror—there just ain't no doubt about it, the bartender is related to Uncle Coot by blood, not marriage.

Smith knows the coming explosion is going to cost Curly Bill a million dollars legally tender money. But his duty now is to see that homicide ain't committed on the premises.

"I am appalled, shocked, and thunderstruck!" Cootberg J. says finally, pokin' a finger like a pistol barrel on Curly Bill's nose. "*You* are my Nephew Willy! Don't deny it! You are the proprietor of this foul sewer! YOU are guilty of besmirching the spotless Grane escrutcheon by retailing alcoholic spirits for profit! Like Sam, like son—infernal booze hounds!"

Curly Bill twitches his ears a time or two as he comes out of his transom. He swallers a snort of raw gin right in front of Coot's nose, and everbody present knows hell is out of its halter now. Curly Bill is slow to rile, but mad, he's a terror.

"Yeah! I'm Sam's son—and proud of it!" Curly Bill blows up. "At least I make *my* livin' honest, not peddlin' sugared water under a phony medicine label at absorbent prices. You can take your million-buck leg-I-see, Uncle Coot, and you can—"

Before Uncle Coot can be informed as to what he can do with his bequests, Coot spies a bottle of his Young Man's Fancy Spring Tonic on the backbar shelf. That really sets his cork to bobbing.

"I absolutely refuse to allow my respectable product to be dispensed in a grogshop!" he screeches. "Hand over that tonic! I will wager you have diluted my secret formula with alcohol—otherwise you couldn't sell it to your lowbrow clientele. Hand over that bottle at once, do you hear? I want to sample it for myself!"

Curly Bill refuses to do same. Right then, Justin Other Smith gits one of his famous ideas. He sneaks around behint the bar and swipes the bottle of tonic whilst Curly Bill and his Uncle are swapping insults loud enough to wake the dead out in boothill.

Smith hustles over to the pool table where Inky McKrimp, editor of the *Weekly Warwhoop*, is minding his own business astraddle of his jenny mule, Queen Cleopatra. Like always, Inky has got a jug of his homebrewed "Essense of Tarantula Juice" slung around a thumb, a concoction so potent nobody but Inky has ever been able to manage it. Even Ache-in-the-Back, who'll drink anything, is afeared of it.

Everbody is so busy watchin' the verbal fireworks between the two Granes, they don't see Smith empty the spring tonic into a spittoon, and refill the bottle with McKrimp's bust-skull bootleg.

Corking the bottle, the Paintin' Pistoleer sidles over to where Uncle Coot is standing with both feet tippy-toed on the brass rail, so he can feud eye-to-eye with his nephew. Smith busts up the brawl by saying:

"Mister Cootberg, sir, you do Mr. Grane an injustice, inferring he would tamper with your patent-medicine formula in the slightest. Here—sample it yourself and see."

Cootberg J. Grane grabs the Young Man's Fancy Spring Tonic bottle from Smith and swigs down the contents with one long gulp.

The reaction to same is somewhat startling. Uncle Coot's eyes pop out like goose eggs. His droopin' handlebar mustaches all of a suddent straighten out and twist up like corkscrews. Uncle

Coot honks like a bull moose a time or two. He lets a jet of steam escape his gullet. Then, before arybody can lay a holt of him, he yanks a six-gun out of saddlemaker Clem Chouder's holster and starts sprayin' lead at the floor, ceiling, and backbar mirror.

Everbody ducks for cover. When Uncle Coot has emptied the .45, the Paintin' Pistoleer turns to Rimfire Cudd and says, "Sheriff, crawl out from under this pool table and do your duty! Arrest that vagrant for being drunk and disorderly. I personally will swear out the complaint."

But Rimfire won't budge out of hiding until he sees Uncle Coot turn a flip-flop in the air and land with his head stuck in one of the saloon cuspidors. Coot is out colder'n a well-digger's feet, his nostrils fumin' in the spittoon like the muzzle of a shotgun.

After the sheriff has toted Uncle Coot to a cell in the county jail he gits blacksmith Anvil Aggie over from the Mare's Nest Livery Barn to pry the cuspidor offn the prisoner's noggin.

Early next day Cootberg J. Grane revives to find two visitors on hand—Inky McKrimp and the Paintin' Pistoleer. Durin' the night, Editor McKrimp has run off an extry edition of the *Warwhoop*, a copy of which he now hands Uncle Coot. Even with a hangover built for a horse, Uncle Coot can read the two-inch headlines about hisself:

NOTED PROHIBITIONIST COOTBERG J. GRANE RUNS AMUCK WITH GUN IN SALOON WHILE INTOXICATED; JAILED PENDING PUBLIC TRIAL.

"Ohhh!" Coot moans. "This publicity would ruin me. I've got to buy up every copy of this paper. How many and how much?"

Inky McKrimp growls, "My press run for this edition was thirty-eight copies. But it's agin the Cornstitution to suppress scandal as juicy as this. It'll cost you a thousand bucks to keep me from puttin' this scoop on the wires to ever editor in the U.S.A., Mister Coot."

"Cheap at twice the price," Coot says. But Justin Other Smith won't allow any outright blackmail like Inky's ticktacks.

"I've talked over your case with Curly Bill," Smith tells the prisoner. "If you settle the damages and leave town for keeps, letting your nephew run his saloon as usual, Apache will overlook your disgraceful conduct and never mention it to the outside world."

Of course Cootberg J. Grane falls all over hisself agreeing to this, knowing he's lucky to escape with his reputation intacked.

"My circus train is passing through Apache this mornin' at ten," he says. "I'll git aboard it, never to return—and Nephew Willy can still be my beneficiary. But before I go—uh—I'd sure like to meet the man who improved the formula of my tonic. I would pay a thousand dollars to get that recipe. It was, uh, deliciously energizing."

Of course Inky McKrimp accepts Coot's proposition, over Justin O. Smith's violent objections. "If he starts manufacturing your Essence of Tarantula Juice," Smith says, "he'll poison the population on a nationwide scale. You shouldn't have sold your homebrew recipe to Uncle Coot—in the public's interest."

The editor chuckles. "Coot won't be able to git the essential ingreedy-unts back in Alabama where his factory is," he reassures Justin O. "Like diced loco-

weed roots or blue-tailed beetle squeezin's. Our commonweal's collective elementary canals are safe."

Well, anyhow. Sheriff Cudd escorts Uncle Coot over to the depot at 'ten o'clock when Grane's Wild Animal Circus train stops to take on wood and water. Everbody in town, includin' Prunella Fishman and her quadruped babies—Sol is laid up—are on hand to see him off. Uncle Coot is so relieved to know the Fishman offsprings ain't related to him, he presents each baby a $100 bill before he gits aboard the train. Which helped pay Sol for his mortardom.

Just before the circus engineer gets his highball signal, though, something happent which steals the show from Uncle Coot. Old Chief Ache-in-the-Back has jined the joovenile population of 'Pache down the tracks alongside the Elephant Car. The Injun is toting a bottle of beer he had swiped offn Curly Bill's bar.

Now, the old redskin ain't ever heard tell of an elephant, let alone seen one close up. So he ain't ready for what happent next. The elephant reaches out through the bars with its trunk, grabs the beer from the Chief's hand, tucks it into its mouth, and swallers it with one gulp, bottle and all.

Wellsir, Ache-in-the-Back is scairt silly. He taken to the brush, squallin' at the top of his lungs. He don't show up in 'Pache for so long, Uncle Coot's overnight visit is about forgot. When the Chief does appear, his squaw Flushing Waters marches him into the Bloated Goat barroom by the ear. It's the same old story:

"Chief want-um to bury hatchet. Smoke-um peacepipe. Make treaty never steal paleface firewater again," Flushing Waters announces. "Chief go loco sick in head. Thinks big animal—big like barn—grab bottle from Injun's hand with its *tail!*"

The Paintin' Pistoleer titters. "Aw, come-off, ma'am!" he says. "No animal but a monkey could grab anything with its tail. And monkeys aren't barn-sized. The chief *was* seein' things."

Ache-in-the-Back shrugs. "I have spoken," he ughs dignified.

Curly Bill goes on the peck pronto. "Hold on!" he bellers. "You ain't done speakin' till you tell me what the varmint did with that bottle o' beer you choused offn my bar!"

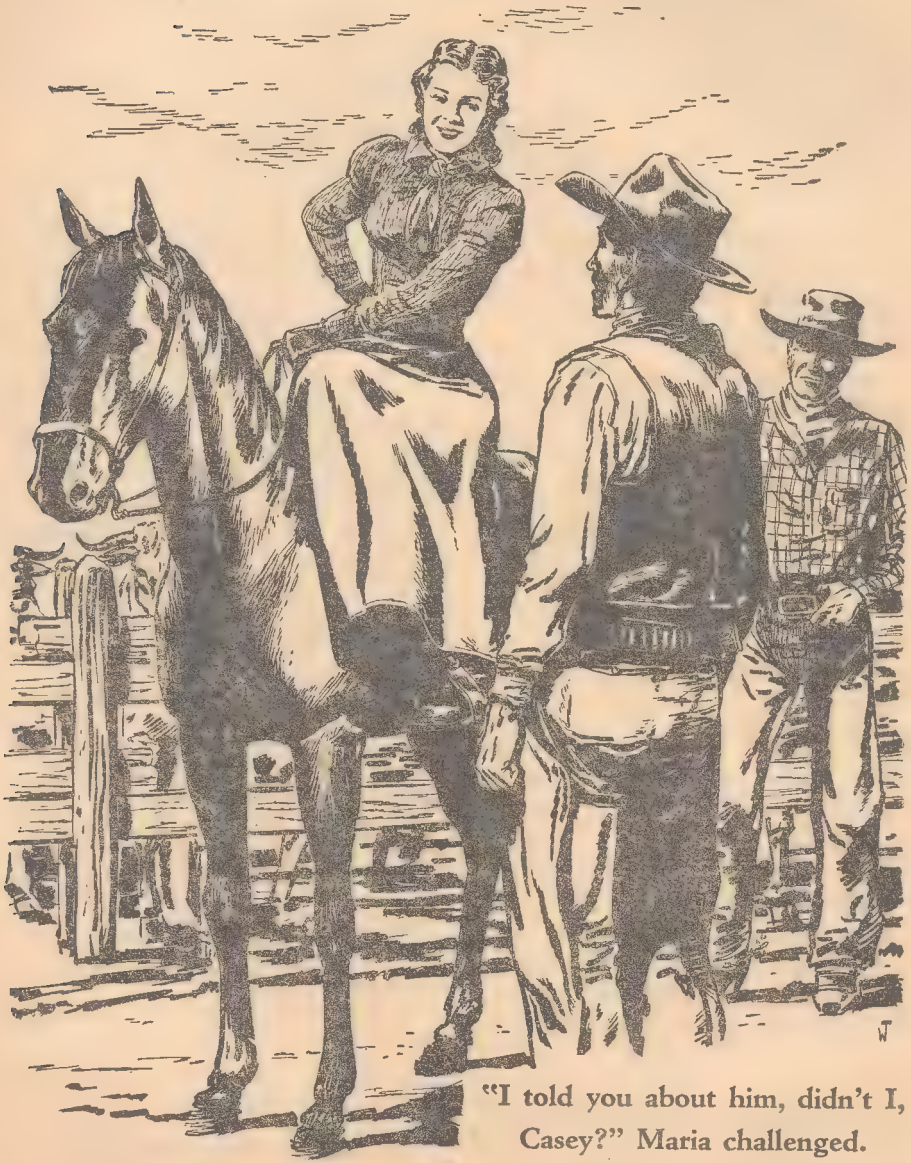
The old Injun goes into a whispered powwow with Flushing Waters, in the Apache jargon. Then he comes up with:

"Squaw say Chief better not tell-um what animal done with beer. On account you palefaces would think Chief is heap big liar who talks with a forked tongue. I have spoken."

Answers to "Pick Your Terror" quiz on page 114

APACHE	SIOUX
Chiricahua	Miniconjou
Tonto	Hunkpapa
Jicarilla	Sans Arc
Mescalero	Brulé
Coyotero	Oglala

A Novelette by Joseph Chadwick



"I told you about him, didn't I, Casey?" Maria challenged.

RIDE WITH THE DEVIL

CHAPTER ONE

Unexpected Break

The redhead was sure a looker, but Casey couldn't decide whether she was to be trusted or not.

THIS HERE EDMUNDS ACT that Congress passed in '87 was a kind of a shotgun, saying, "Marry the girl!" But it didn't bother me any. I was no squawman, I wasn't mixed up with any Mex shawl woman, and none of the few American women in the Territory in those days could say that Ed Casey, meaning me, had even so much as offered to go double-harness with her.

But the law was aimed at a lot of men known to me. And, though it riled them plenty and there was talk that old Senator Edmunds back in Washington should be strung up, plenty of couples living in sin, so to speak, made haste to take out a marriage license and hunt up a parson or a justice of the peace.

There were some mavericks, of course—hombres who wouldn't let any shotgun legislation scare them. Like, for example, the man who moved close to the Mexican border with his common-law wife, a Papago squaw, and decamped across the line whenever a lawman happened along. Too, there were others who pulled up stakes and headed for parts unknown rather than do the right thing. My partner, Frank Hornaday, was one of the latter.

I'd known Frank back in the Texas Panhandle, but hadn't seen him for six, seven years until I ran into him in San Alejandro. He was sitting at a table in Juan Redondo's Frisco Saloon, drinking redeye whisky and brooding like a man down on his luck. He hadn't changed much; he was still a handsome buckaroo with blondish hair and a ruddy complexion.

I recognized him at once. Crossing the barroom, I dropped a hand on his shoulder and said, "So I've finally caught up with you, bucko!"

It was a fool thing to do, coming up behind a man and taking him by surprise. I knew better, but Frank Hornaday had always been an easy-going cuss with a sort of devil in him and—well, I couldn't know that he'd changed inside if not outside. First thing I knew he'd heaved out of his chair so fast that it upset with a crash, and his cocked gun was jabbing me in the belly. There was a wild look in his eyes.

"Frank!" I yelped.

He recognized me, and not a split second too soon. There was no doubt about it. He'd almost shot me. I'd been practically a dead man. But he got over his scare. He eased his gun off cock, holstered it, grinned.

"Hi, Casey," he said, and slapped me on the back. "Hell, man; you're a sight for sore eyes. Sit down, have a drink."

We sat down and we had a couple drinks.

He said suddenly, "Say, Casey—you got any money?"

"A little," I said warily. "How much do you need, Frank?"

"I'm stony broke," he told me. "I had a stake, but I got into a poker game

over in Tucson. Dropped two thousand. But I don't want a loan. Look; I've got a deal on but I can't swing it without a little cash. You put up the money it'll take, and we'll go partners." He saw me look doubtful. "It's on the level, Casey. There's a big cow outfit just changed hands, and I can get the contract for gathering its stock off the *Jornado*—providing I can get a chuck wagon, provisions, a remuda, and a crew."

"What's the outfit?"

"I'll tell you—if we're partners."

I thought it over, and said, "We're partners if you answer one question straight, Frank. Are you on the dodge from the law?"

He gave me a surprised look. "Me? What makes you think that?"

"You're kind of jumpy, Frank."

He laughed in his old way. "I'm jumpy, all right. But not because the law is after me." He hesitated a moment, then added with a sheepish grin, "I was in pretty thick with a girl for a couple years. We got along fine until this loco law about there having to be a marriage certificate, then she got to nagging at me. Why, damn it, she even had a deputy marshal come around and lecture me. Told me I had three days to marry the girl or give her up. You know me, Casey. I'm no hand for settling down for keeps. I figured two years was long enough, so I drifted."

I didn't think much of that. It seemed like a raw deal. But that was Frank Hornaday. Love 'em and leave 'em; he'd always been like that. It wasn't any of my business. He was a top hand with cattle and horses, and he made a good roundup boss. Too, he had a way about him that put him next to big deals like the one he now had on the fire. Without a plugged peso in his pocket, Frank could pard around with the biggest cattlemen on any range—and be accepted. He was mostly bluff, but he got away with it. Maybe he didn't play square with the women, but I've never known him to be crooked in any other way. I'd be making a good deal, going partners with him.

"So that's all that's worrying you," I said. "The girl is on your trail."

Frank shrugged. "She was crazy about me," he said. "And a woman scorned— Shucks, Casey, forget about her! What about the deal? Do you have money enough for a chuck wagon, grub, and some horses?"

"Yeah. And it's a fifty-fifty deal?"

"Oh, sure."

"How much will we collect a head on the cattle we gather?"

"A dollar a head."

"How many head has this outfit got?"

"Fifteen thousand, on the books. Ten thousand on the range, maybe."

I whistled in amazement. I'd figured it would be a few hundred head, maybe a thousand or two. But this meant that I stood to make five thousand dollars, less my investment of a few hundred dollars and what wages we'd have to pay for roundup hands. There must have been a look of amazement on my face, for Frank was laughing at me.

"It all comes of knowing the right people," he said. "That's a knack you ought to have, Casey."

"Yeah," I said. "When do we start?"

"First thing in the morning."

"That suits me fine."

I'd get up early any morning to start earning five thousand dollars.

THE DEAL WENT THROUGH. We got the contract, and Frank Hornaday and I were partners. We hired a chuck wagon, stocked it, bought twenty head of

broncs, hired a cook and a half dozen riders—all Mexes, because they came cheaper. There didn't seem to be a thing wrong with the deal. If there was a hitch, it was well hidden. I couldn't see it and, after we got started, I didn't look very hard for it. We began gathering cattle by the hundreds, at a dollar a head.

The critters were scattered to hell-and-gone across a seventy-mile-long strip of black grama range and *tornillo* thickets, and they were in the TCC iron. The Territorial Cattle Company was selling out to a new outfit called the Southwestern Land & Cattle Company, and Southwestern was owned by a couple of northern bigwigs who didn't know a bull from a cow. They'd sent a man named J. P. Avery out from Philadelphia to manage their ranch.

Frank and I had contracted to deliver the cattle at the TCC pens at the town of Valido, where they were to be tallied for Avery's benefit. Since Frank figured there were ten thousand head to be gathered, we decided to shape up four herds of twenty-five hundred head each. A herd of that size wouldn't be too hard to handle when we threw it onto the trail to Valido.

The first herd was gathered in a hurry and without much trouble. It was desert country, and there was plenty of stock near the waterholes and the wells TCC had dug and rigged with windmills. It took us only four days to throw that first bunch of twenty-five hundred head together.

Frank Hornaday said, "An easy twenty-five hundred dollars, Casey." His grin showed that he was feeling as good about it as I was.

He was a good partner. He did his share of the riding, and I had to look sharp to keep up with him. Better still, he had that talent for bossing a crew and getting plenty of work out of hired hands—a talent that not every man is lucky enough to own. None of our riders did any soldiering on us. It wasn't because Frank was always riding their tails; he wasn't that kind of a boss. It was more because those Mex *vaqueros* liked him; it's easy to do your best for a boss you can respect, and those Mexicans respected Frank Hornaday.

Working with Frank, I wondered why he wasn't up there with the big boys—the big-caliber cattlemen. Then I knew the answer. Women, gambling, whisky. Frank could swing big deals and work like a demon, but not because of real ambition and not because he was building a future. It was just to get hold of some money so that he could have a rowdy good time. His pursuit of pleasure would keep him from being the man he was capable of being.

We got our first herd shaped up for the trail by midafternoon of that fourth day, and Frank told the crew to loaf around the rest of the day. That too showed he knew how to handle men; plenty of cowmen would have hit the trail right off, rather than to waste four, five hours of daylight, but Frank knew it was no waste. Men, horses and cattle would feel more like taking the trail, after a rest.

We had the herd bunched in a broad hollow where there was one of TCC's windmills feeding water into a tank from a well. We loafed around the chuck wagon, and Frank Hornaday knew how to loaf better than the rest of us. He spread a blanket out in the shade, stretched out on it, and he had his tobacco sack, papers, and matches lying handy beside him. I never saw a man so relaxed. He didn't look like he had a worry in the world. It seemed to

me that he no longer had that girl he'd walked out on bothering his conscience.

He said lazy-voiced, "Ed, what are you going to do with your money?"

"Buy me a start in the cattle business."

"And be a raggedy-pants two-bit rancher, eh?"

"A man's got to settle down sometime. I've been trying to save enough to get a start for years, but this is the first real chance I've got—thanks to you. I always did hanker to own my spread, be my own boss, have a home of my own. Look, Frank; why don't you throw in with me? Together, we wouldn't stay raggedy-pants cowmen. We'd grow big, sure."

"Sorry, Casey."

"You aiming to throw your money away on wine, women, and song, eh?"

He laughed. "That's a lot of fun," he said. "You should try it once. No, I've been itching to make a trip to California. Was out there three, four years ago. There was a Spanish girl, daughter of a big *ranchero*. I was broke then, and couldn't get anywhere with her. But with money in my pockets—"

One of the Mexicans called, "Somebody coming, Señor Frank."

I saw Frank start violently, heard him swear under his breath. He jumped up and stared at a buckboard and team approaching from the direction of Valido. An old Mexican drove the rig, and he had a woman—a *gringa*—with him. Frank swore again, out loud and real nasty.

"That the girl?" I asked.

"Eh?" he said, not looking at me.

"The girl you walked out on. Is this her?"

"Oh. Yeah. Yeah, it's her."

He looked like he wanted to run.

Chapter Two

Maria

SHE was young, and a looker. Not that I saw her close, right off. Frank hurried to intercept the buckboard before it got close to the camp. The girl got out of the rig, and I could tell that they were arguing. She looked to be in a temper, and Frank looked sort of desperate.

She was a tall girl in a mighty pretty dark green traveling-dress. She had red-brown hair that was bright in the sunlight, a soft coppery mass. The wind was playing with her hair and with her skirt. She wasn't in the mood to play, however, and she slapped down her skirt with an angry gesture when the wind lifted it too high.

She never stopped talking; I couldn't hear her voice, but I could see her lips going. Frank could hardly get a word in edgewise, it looked to me. And he had that hangdog look that always comes over a man when a woman raises Cain with him.

Finally, after maybe ten minutes, he left her and came back to camp. He halted in front of me, where I was hunkered down in the shade of the chuck wagon. He looked plenty worried.

"Casey, you've got to help me out," he said.

"Me? How?"

"She wants some money," he said. "I told her I don't have a peso, but she says she won't leave until I give her five hundred dollars. I've told her about the money we'll get when we finish rounding up the TCC herd, but she claims she won't leave until she gets

five hundred on account."

"On account, Frank?"

"Yeah. She wants two thousand altogether. She'll wait for the rest if I give her five hundred now." He looked at me pleadingly. "She'll let me alone, once I pay her the two thousand. And it looks like I've got to pay it, now that she's found me. She—well, she's got a lot of hardcase friends that she'll turn loose on me if I don't pay up."

"Frank, if I had a woman like that crazy about me," I said, "I'd hold onto her. I'd do the right thing and marry her. You won't find a better looker."

"She's got the devil in her too much of the time."

"Spirit, Frank."

"She's got a nasty temper. She nags all the time."

"Well, it's your choice," I said, tossing my cigarette away. "I haven't got five hundred left, Frank. I can loan you two hundred—"

He looked relieved. "Maybe she'll take it," he said eagerly.

He took my money, hurried out to the girl. She accepted it, tucked it inside the bosom of her dress. Then they argued some more. Finally Frank came striding back to the camp, mad as a hornet.

"Miguel," he said to our cook, "the lady and her driver are hungry. Damn! Women are always hungry. It's no wonder they get fat, after you've had 'em a few years. Rustle up some grub, will you, *amigo?*"

Miguel would.

The girl came into the camp, sought the shade of the wagon, which brought her close to me. I didn't stare at her, but the hands did. I just watched her out of the corner of my eye. And she was a beauty. I've been down into Old Mexico and seen plenty of good-looking señoritas. So I knew: this girl was a real beauty, and Frank Hornaday was a damn' fool.

She stood there in the shade, a stiff look on her face, and Frank hung around near by. They didn't talk; they watched each other like a couple of cross dogs. I got the idea that Frank stayed close so she wouldn't talk to me.

The old Mexican drove up, unhitched his team, watered the horses at the tank, then tied them to the left rear wheel of his buckboard. By and by, Miguel called him and the girl to chuck. The coosie fell over himself serving the girl, and the *vaqueros* to a man developed a sudden thirst for coffee. Those Mexes drank coffee all the while the girl was eating, just to be close and look at her.

Frank was pacing back and fro, worrying, wishing she would eat and leave. She took her good time, and when she was finished she motioned to Frank. He went over to where she sat, and after a minute I heard him yelp:

"Nothing doing! Now, you listen to me, Maria—"

They argued for a while, their voices lower, then finally they came over to me. There was a resolute look about the girl, and Frank looked plain mad.

"Ed, you tell her," he said. "You tell her that I'll keep my word. She says she's going to stay with us until I pay the full two thousand. We can't have a woman hanging around a cow camp. You tell her, Ed."

I told her, "Frank will keep his word. Why don't you wait at Valido?"

She sized me up. She had the prettiest eyes; they were amber-colored. "You're Ed Casey, are you?" she said. "I've heard of you. You used to work for the Bar X outfit. You've got a good reputation, Casey, but I can't think

you're too trustworthy, since you're in with this no-good."

I didn't know what to say to that.

She said, "All right, I'll wait at Valido. He's given me two hundred dollars. He owes me eighteen hundred more. To me, that's a lot of money. And I intend to collect it. If you two don't show up there—well, there's going to be trouble. Real trouble." She turned away, calling to her driver, "Come along, Felipe."

They were in the buckboard, ready to pull out, when she called, "Casey, I want a word with you."

I walked over, and Frank followed me like a shadow. He said, "Now, Maria, don't go starting a fuss. You can take Casey's word, even if you can't—"

She ignored him, looked levelly at me. "You look all right to me, Casey," she said. "So I'm going to give you a warning. Don't trust that partner of yours. I'd gamble the two hundred dollars I got from him—and the other eighteen hundred too—that he's planning to skin you out of your share of the money you're working for. You'd better keep an eye on him."

She nodded to Felipe, and the old man let his team get going.

I watched the buckboard until it was out of sight, then I looked at Frank Hornaday. I never saw a man look so sheepish. He tried to grin, but it didn't come off. And when he said disgustedly, "Women!" it was clear that he felt guilty.

I didn't forget the girl, nor her warning either.

She was just the kind of girl I wanted to have in my ranch house on the spread I was going to own one of these days. Only did I want this particular one, knowing as I did what she'd been to another man? Still, I couldn't forget her. She was even in my dreams that night.

I WOULD HAVE FORGOTTEN her warning that Frank Hornaday meant to skin me out of my share of the cattle money but for one thing. I found out that he had it in him to be crooked in money matters as well as conscienceless in a love affair. It happened when we got the herd to the TCC pens at Valido where the cattle were tallied for both J. P. Avery of the Southwestern Land & Cattle Company and for Mitch Bell, who was one of the owners of the Territorial Cattle Company.

The count came out twenty-five hundred thirty-one head. Avery signed a receipt for that tally, for Mitch Bell, and Bell gave Frank a paper crediting us for delivering that many at the company's pens. Frank and Mitch stood there talking, and this J. P. Avery—the greenest kind of a tinhorn—said to me:

"All right, Casey. Have your men turn them back onto the range."

"What?" I said, surprised. "You haven't branded them yet."

He was a pudgy, red-faced, cigar-smoking dude. He looked at me like I was a poor dumb yokel.

"They're already branded," he said, as though he were explaining something to a backward child. "One brand is sufficient. Turn them out."

"Why, man, we'll be rounding up TCC's forever!"

Frank and Mitch came over, and my partner said, "Anything to oblige. Casey, have the boys turn those cattle out." He gave me a wink that Avery didn't notice. He was poker-faced, not joking. He began yelling at our riders, "Esteban, Jorge, Diego."

I looked at Mitch Bell, a stocky man with a sorrel mustache and goatee. He

was grinning. It was just a joke to him, a cow-country joke on a tenderfoot. They'd tell about it for years! Bell wasn't going to spoil the fun. But it wasn't fun.

Frank Hornaday was in dead earnest; he was going to turn the herd loose and gather it up again—and let J. P. Avery pay for it again. Mitch Bell's TCC outfit would be paid over and over for the same cattle, and we—Frank and I—would collect a dollar a head so long as we kept bringing in TCC's, no matter how often we brought in the same critters. I wasn't going for that.

"Mr. Avery, you don't know what you're talking about," I told the dude. He began to sputter, not liking that kind of talk from a mere cowhand. "You've got to have a brand of your own, and you've got to burn it on each of your cows."

He wasn't so dumb that he didn't catch on. He looked at Mitch Bell. "That's right?"

Bell chuckled. "That's right, J. P.," he said, and roared with laughter.

Frank Hornaday gave me a scowling look, then he forced some laughter. He was sore about what I'd done, but he was trying to hide his feelings. I turned away, then stopped short in my tracks. There was the girl Maria, sitting side-saddle on a sorrel mare, solemn as a judge.

"I told you about him," she said. "Didn't I, Casey?"

I didn't say anything. I just stared at her, falling head-over-heels in love.

She was pretty wonderful, and I stood there staring foolishly. Suddenly she didn't look so solemn. A smile formed on her lips, and her eyes lighted with laughter. She knew what was happening to me; she'd learned about men from Frank Hornaday, and so I was an open book to her. And what she saw amused her. She was laughing—at me.

I wasn't much to look at. I was pretty seedy; I needed a barbering and some new clothes. I was wolf-lean; the only meat on my six-foot-two frame was stringy muscle. Under the black stubble of my beard, my face was all angles. I looked as though I'd stood at the bottom of my class on graduating from the school of hard knocks. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Didn't I, Casey?" Maria said. "Didn't I tell you about him?"

"Yeah—I guess you did."

"There's only one person in this world Frank Hornaday plays straight with," she told me. "That's himself."

She gigged her horse forward, pulling up beyond me and facing Frank.

I heard her ask him for her money, and when I moved on he was explaining to her, in a harassed voice, that we weren't collecting any money from the Territorial Cattle Company until we finished bringing in the TCC cattle. They were still arguing when I headed for town.

I still had a little money in my pocket, about eighteen dollars in silver coins and 'dobe dollars. So I bought myself a shirt and a pair of Levi's at Valido's general store, then hunted for a barbershop. I took a bath in the backroom tub, scrubbing myself hard with yellow soap, then I got into my clean clothes and had the barber give me a haircut and a shave. I didn't look handsome when I left the shop, but I did look a lot better.

Valido was a one-street town, and the livery stable was at the north end of the street. I saw Maria leave her sorrel horse there, then come toward the center of town but along the opposite

side of the street. I wanted to ask her to have supper with me, but before I could screw up my courage enough, Maria had passed me and gone into the hotel.

So I ate alone.

Chapter Three

Distrust

WE WENT back to the Jornado and began building up our second bunch of TCC cattle. The gather went a little slower this time; we had to cover a lot more range to find the stock, but we had all the time in the world and a roundup wasn't really work for us. It was merely a part of our way of life. We were in the saddle from dawn to dusk, and thought nothing of it. Me, I wouldn't have changed jobs with the president of a big-town bank. Maybe I just didn't know any better. Anyway, Frank and the Mexes and I were living the way we wanted to live.

Frank and I still hit it off all right, but I had a feeling that things weren't quite the same between us. We never mentioned that business about J. P. Avery's not wanting to brand the cattle he was buying. The fact that Frank never talked of it, never laughed about it, convinced me that he'd been serious about not wanting me to tell the dude the facts of range life.

I didn't like knowing that about my partner, because if he was willing to take advantage of one man—well, wouldn't he cheat another? Maybe his own partner? Maybe the feeling I had that things weren't the same between us was my fault. Relations are apt to become strained when one man distrusts another, even when he keeps his distrust to himself.

The girl had something to do with it, of course. She'd put a bug in my ear, a snaky suspicion in my mind. The two times I'd seen her, she'd deliberately tried to make me distrustful of Frank.

We drove our second herd into the company pens at Valido three weeks after we started gathering it. Mitch Bell and J. P. Avery were there to tally them, and this time Avery had a crew working for him. His crew had branded his first bunch, and were ready to start on this second herd. Avery had decided on an S in a square as his iron. The brand soon got to be called Snake-in-the-Box. Maria showed up again, riding out from town on the sorrel mare.

She said to Frank, "I just wanted you to know that I'm still waiting."

Frank didn't let her bother him this time. He grinned at her, and said, "Just keep on waiting, honey, and you'll get what you want."

I didn't like that.

It seemed to me that Frank was half decided to go back with her. I could understand that he might be considering it. He'd been away from her for quite a while now, and that made her look good to him again. That was as it should be, I reflected. He should do right by her. But I didn't want him to have her, him or any man. I wanted her for myself, and I wanted her so bad I was willing to forget what had been between her and Frank. It was kind of foolish, my thinking that I could have her if Frank didn't take her back. For she said less to me this time than on the other two times we met.

She merely said, "Hello, Casey."

We were seven weeks delivering our third herd, for we had to fine-comb the

tornillo thickets far across the Jornado to build it up to twenty-five hundred head. The cattle in the thickets were as wild as brush cattle always get, and a lot of them we had to snake out on the ends of our ropes.

When we delivered that bunch, Frank told Mitch Bell and J. P. Avery, "The range is about cleaned up of TCC stock. I doubt if our next bunch will tally more than a thousand head."

Mitch Bell said, "You'll probably find another thousand over in the Hatchet Hills. Don't pass them up, Frank."

"Don't worry, I won't," Frank Hornaday replied. "Not at a dollar a head."

Maybe he didn't mean anything by it, but I didn't like him saying "I won't." He should have said "We won't." After all, it was a partnership. I wondered if he might have some notion of somehow cutting me out when the payoff was made. Queer how suspicious a man gets when he distrusts somebody.

The chuck wagon had to be restocked, so I told Miguel to drive into town. I went to the general store, which was owned by a man named Eberts. He knew about our contract with the Territorial Cattle Company, and so he was willing to give me credit. I bought flour, beans, coffee, salt, tobacco, some canned goods.

I was helping Miguel load the stuff into the wagon when Maria appeared. The post office was in Eberts's store, and she had a letter to mail.

She said, "Hello, Casey," and smiled.

I felt all weak inside, and quivery. My heart began to pound hard and fast; I felt hot and then cold, and then hot again. I felt like I was sick. When she came out of the store, she smiled again. I got hold of my nerve, and fell into step with her. We walked toward the hotel.

"I didn't see you down at the pens today," I said, my voice choked up.

"Oh, I didn't bother to go there this time," she told me. "But I'll be among those present when you arrive with the last bunch. The next one will be the last, won't it?"

I said that it would.

"You'll be paid by Mr. Bell here at Valido?"

"Yes. Why do you ask that?"

"I don't want him to trick me out of what he owes me."

She meant Frank Hornaday, of course. "He won't do that," I said. "If he promised you the money, he'll pay it. I know him pretty well." I didn't mention that I'd come to distrust him.

We reached the hotel, stood there facing each other. It was hazy dusk, but it seemed to me that Maria possessed a glow of her own. Her loveliness was a shining thing. She smiled at me.

"You're rather nice, Casey," she told me. "A little too nice, I'm afraid. You're honest, so you think everyone else is honest. Do you want to know why I'm wasting my time here, waiting for that money he's promised to give me? Has he told you about me?"

I said that he hadn't told me about her, and I hoped the lie didn't show on my face. "I don't want to know about you and him," I said. "Whatever was between you doesn't matter to me. But if I was in Frank Hornaday's boots, I sure wouldn't give you a dirty deal like he's doing."

"Well, you're a lot different, Casey."

"I don't know what ails him, mistreating a girl like you."

"Why, Casey!"

We sat on the hotel porch steps, and somehow I got to talking about myself.

I told her what I planned to do with the money I would get out of the partnership. I told her about a little ranch over in the Mogollons, about it being owned by a Mexican named Guzman who wanted to sell out and move to El Paso. I told her that maybe I would buy him out.

I talked to her as I'd never talked to anybody else before, just as though she was interested in me. I got enthusiastic, and I could see myself owning that spread in the hills. I could even visualize Maria there in the old adobe ranch house, waiting at the door when I came in off the range— I talked a long time.

Maria said finally, "It sounds nice, Casey. A man should be his own boss if he's capable of it. A man should settle down, marry, raise a family. That's the way a man should live."

"It might be lonely out there, for a woman."

"Not if she has a man to love her."

"I wonder—"

"Yes—?"

It was hard for me to say it. I was never much for fancy words, and besides I was awed by Maria. But I knew that I had to say it now or maybe never say it at all. I stammered a lot, but I got it out.

"I'd never walk out on a woman. I'd marry her and try to do right by her. I haven't got much to offer, but—well, do you think you'd consider it?" I was in an agony of embarrassment, and because of that I said the wrong thing. "I guess you'll go back to him if he wants you back with him," I said. "But if he doesn't—"

Her face turned stiff and white. "So he did talk about me," she said. "And he told you that I—"

Her voice broke. She rose, turned, ran up the steps quickly, and vanished into the hotel.

A rider loomed out of the darkness, reined in before me. It was Frank Hornaday.

"Been looking all over for you," he said sourly. "Let's get started back to the Jornado, Casey."

"All right," I said, rising. "All right."

I wasn't merely distrustful of him then.

I hated his guts.

Chapter Four

Close Call—for Two

WE WENT into the Hatchets after the TCC stock that had wandered into the hills, and it was one tough job to catch them. Cattle turn wild in a hurry when they take to the brush and timber, and the TCC's were as wild as the country—as wild as the deer and bears we glimpsed in the Hatchets. We rode ourselves ragged, our horses too. We had to rope the critters, one by one. We threw the gather into a little box canyon, and held them there by building a brush fence across the entrance. We were really earning our dollar a head now.

Frank and I worked together the same as always, but things weren't the same between us. We hadn't anything to say to each other any more, and when we weren't working we kept out of each other's way. I figured that Frank was peeved because I'd been with Maria that night in Valido. He had no reason to be peeved about that, since he'd walked out on her, but a woman always looks best to a man when somebody else wants her. I had a notion that Frank was getting inter-

ested in Maria again just because I was interested in her. I figured something else, too. It might be that he thought that she had been running him down to me, which made him feel sheepish.

For my part, I hated his guts for what he'd done to Maria. And the longer it went, the more uneasy I became about him. It wasn't only the girl's warning about his planning to skin me out of my share of the money. I wouldn't have distrusted him on that score alone. But it was knowing that he would have cheated J. P. Avery that made me realize that he was crooked. It got to be an obsession with me, the belief that he was planning to cheat me. I couldn't see how he would work it. Mitch Bell knew we were partners, and he'd get suspicious and maybe hold up the payoff if Frank tried to collect without me being present.

By the end of ten days, after fine-combing the hills, we had eight hundred twenty-seven TCC cattle penned in the box canyon. We'd missed a few brush-wise cattle, and Frank told the hands, "We'll pick up what we can tomorrow, then move the gather down into the Jornado and finish picking up what stock we missed there."

I was glad that we were to have but one more day of it. I was never much of a brushpopping cowhand. The Mexicans were relieved, too. All of us were dog-tired, brush-scarred, and growing gaunted. It would be a welcome relief to get back onto the grass flats of the desert.

We dragged ourselves out of our blankets at dawn, ate breakfast, saddled up, rode away from our camp at the entrance to the box canyon. It was every man for himself, more or less, the cattle being so few and so hard to find. We scattered. For a time I saw Jorge Aragon off to my left, but he sighted a cow in a ravine and went after it.

I rode for a couple miles without sighting a single critter, then I had a glimpse of a big roan bull moving through a cedar brake. It was as big a cow critter as I'd ever seen, with horns like sabers. I was riding a stocky dun horse that had been a good cowpony—up until now. Getting a look and a scent of that roan bull, the dun began to get skittish.

But I used spurs on him, and we went into the cedar. It was one hell of a chase. The bull went one way and another, finding a way through the scrub trees where none existed. I couldn't get close enough to drop a loop on him, and even if I had got close I couldn't have made a throw on account of the trees. We played hide-and-seek for almost an hour, and then the bull broke out of the cedars and led me through a narrow canyon. I heard a rider yell somewhere behind me, and I hoped that he would come along and give me a hand.

All of a sudden the bull wheeled and came at me, his head down and his tail curled. I swerved away, thinking I could catch him from the flank. But the dun spooked and began to buck, and I didn't get to make a throw. Old Saber-horns snorted fiercely when his charge failed. He faced around, watched me on my bucking bronc, his eyes red and his nostrils flaring. He pawed the earth, bellowed. He wasn't scared of me. He just hated me.

I got the dun under control, but before I could shake out my loop, the bull lunged at us again. I could hear the drumming of his hoofs. I could see the slobber dripping from his mouth. If any cow critter ever wanted to gore a

horse and its rider, it was Old Saber-horns. I forgot my rope, and let the dun run. Yeah, that roan bull chased us for a couple of minutes.

He got tired of it finally, and let loose with a victorious trumpeting. He broke into a dogtrot, moving back through the gorge. He kept shaking his head, tossing it, like he was showing off his horns and defying me.

I kept after him, hating to be outsmarted by a cow critter—even one as dangerous and smart as this one. I got close after a time, beyond the canyon, close enough to ready my rope. I rode after him through brush and rocks, and I had my eyes glued to him and trusted my mount to watch where he was going. I made my throw just as the dun lost his footing.

We went down together, hard. Luckily, I was thrown clear of the saddle. If I'd been caught under the dun, I would have gotten a broken leg at least. As it was, I landed on some rocks and was pretty close to being knocked cold.

I lay there dazed, hurting all over. I saw the dun pick himself up, shake himself. I didn't see anything of the roan bull. I tried to rise, but couldn't quite make it. The dun spooked when I moved, and shied away.

Then the shot came. A rifle shot.

I heard the shriek of the slug. Somebody was shooting at me! I remembered the rider who had been behind me earlier, who had yelled at me.

A second shot cracked, and again I heard the ugly whine of the slug. The dun ran away then, and somewhere in the brush I heard Old Saber-horns threshing wildly.

Suddenly it came to me who was using the rifle, and why. And I was plenty scared.

I forgot the bull, even though he was as much of a threat as that hidden rifle. I jumped up and ran through the brush and rocks. I found cover about a hundred yards from the exposed position I'd left. A clump of big boulders. I made myself small among the rocks, and waited there with my gun in my hand.

I still didn't see the man who'd shot at me.

But I waited for him—for Frank Hornaday—with my gun cocked and ready.

It had to be him. Nobody else had reason to want me dead. I swore bitterly, under my breath. He'd planned it like this, from the start. He'd had no intention of splitting the money. He'd made use of me; I'd done a full share of the work—but more, I'd furnished the money that had permitted him to get an outfit together and contract for the job. Damn him! I hated him enough to want to kill him.

I peered from my hiding-place, but could see nothing of him in that tangle of brush and jumble of rocks. Then I heard a sudden *clip-clop* of hoofs behind me. I whirled, swung my gun up. And I saw him before he saw me. He was looking one way and another, his rifle across his saddle.

"All right, Frank," I called out. "Drop it!"

He started violently, jerked his horse to a halt, twisted in the saddle. He gaped at me.

"What the hell ails you, Ed?" he demanded, sounding surprised.

"Don't hand me that," I said savagely. "Don't play dumb!"

"Ed, are you crazy?"

"Just crazy mad," I told him. "Crazy mad enough to gut-shoot you!"

"Why? Why, Ed—for Pete's sake?"

I cursed him. "For trying to kill me,

that's why! You've been following me all morning, and you got your chance when my horse fell with me!"

I kept watching him, and if he'd moved a muscle, I'd have shot him out of the saddle. But he kept as still as a cigar-store Indian; it was the first time I'd ever seen Frank Hornaday scared.

"It's just like the girl warned me," I went on. "She told me you'd try to cheat me out of my share of the money. And the only way you could do it was to kill me!"

He looked desperate. "Ed, you're loco!" he said, almost yelling. "She'd tell you anything to turn you against me. Yeah—she was using you to get revenge on me. I can see it now. She figured you'd get to fighting with me, maybe kill me—for her. That's how much she hates me. She—"

I started yelling, too. "You lying no-good son! The only thing she did wrong was getting mixed up with you—and she's plenty sorry about that. You say another word about her and I'll pull this trigger!"

"I'll prove it, Ed!"

"Prove what?"

"Look, Ed; you were down and almost out when I came up," he said. "I saw you take that spill. I saw that you couldn't help yourself. And there was that loco bull—just behind you and ready to charge. I was shooting at it, not at you. I hit it, and it's lying dead yonder."

It was a trick. He figured I'd look for a dead bull—and end up a dead man.

"Boot that Winchester," I told him. "Get off that horse and walk ahead of me. I'll see if you killed any bull!"

He did as I told him. I followed him with my cocked gun aimed at his back.

We passed the spot where my dun horse had taken the spill. About fifty feet beyond, in a straggly clump of brush, was the old roan bull. The critter was as dead as it would ever be.

I didn't know what to say. There wasn't much you could say to a man you'd accused of trying to murder you, only to find out that he'd saved your life. For that bull would have killed me, sure.

It cleared Frank Hornaday, all right. But nothing was ever going to clear that girl of trying so hard to turn me against my partner, in the hope of getting her revenge on him through me!

"Frank," I said, "I sure had it figured wrong."

"Forget it, Ed," he told me. Then, motioning to the dead bull, he grinned and said, "You should have waited for me to catch up with you, partner. Together, we could have caught that critter. This way, we've lost us a dollar!"

Chapter Five

Payoff on the Trail

THAT was our last day in the hill country. We drove our bunch of wild cattle down from the Hatchets, and they had tamed down some after three days of trailing. We held them loose-herded on a grass flat in the middle of the Jornado, with two of the *vaqueros* guarding them. They liked the grama grass, and didn't cause much trouble except for a few old critters that took a notion to hightail it back to the hills every once in a while.

With the other four Mexicans, Frank and I worked the extreme south portion of the desert. We gathered in what stock was there, riding into unlikely places for them, and finally we had our

fourth herd shaped up and ready for the drive to Valido.

We were four hundred and thirty-eight head short of the ten thousand we'd hoped to gather altogether, but Frank said, "We won't bellyache about that. We're rich men as it is."

I agreed with him.

The last night out from Valido, we were sitting by the campfire. Except for the two men riding night herd, the crew was bedding down. Frank and I were having a last smoke before turning in.

He said suddenly, "Ed, you still aiming to settle down on a spread of your own?"

"Yeah," I said, and told him about the Guzman ranch in the Mogollons.

"Sounds good. Still want me to go partners with you?"

"Sure. That range needs to be stocked, and if we pool our money—" I stared at him, surprised. "You changed your mind about going to California?"

"I guess so."

"What about the señorita out there?"

He shrugged. "I'm sick of women, after what Maria pulled. For a while, anyway. And I've been thinking what a damn'-fool trick it is to throw your money away having some sport, and ending up broke and with a headache. I have a feeling I ought to invest it. If you still want me for a partner, I'll go along with you and have a look at the Guzman place. If it's all you say—well, maybe we can build it into a big outfit and—" he paused to grin—"and someday be cattle barons." Then, sobering: "There's just one thing. The girl."

"What about her? You want to bring her along?"

"Not me. But I was thinking that you'd fallen for her."

I flung my cigarette into the fire, thought a minute, then shook my head. "I did fall for her—hard," I said. "But after the trick she played to make enemies of us—well, I want no part of her."

Frank nodded. "All right, Ed. I had to know. I couldn't stay partners with you if you got yourself tied up with her. We'll head for the Mogollons as soon as we've settled up in Valido. Right?"

I nodded, and tried to sound enthusiastic when I said, "Sure thing."

WE REACHED THE PENS at Valido about noon the next day and, when the herd was tallied, both Mitch Bell and J. P. Avery were satisfied that the range had been cleared of TCC cattle. I gave each of our crew a horse out of our remuda, as a sort of bonus, then sold all but one of the remainder to Avery. Frank and I went to the office of the Territorial Cattle Company, with Mitch Bell, and he paid us off. Frank paid off our hands, and then we divided what remained. Each share amounted to more than forty-five hundred dollars.

I said, "I'll go settle our store bill, Frank, and meet you here later."

He nodded. "Sure, Ed," he said. "We'll leave right away."

I turned away, and almost bumped into Maria. She had come to collect that eighteen hundred dollars from Frank, but her face lighted up and there was a sort of excitement in her voice.

"Hello, Casey. Now you can buy that ranch you want so badly. Or—" she smiled at me—"have you changed your plans for the future?"

My heart seemed to be doing flip-overs. I knew that I had really been in love with her. But I reminded myself that appearances were deceiving. She looked like an angel, but she was really something different. I had been willing

to overlook what she had been to Frank Hornaday; sometimes people can't help getting involved like that. I was willing to believe that she had demanded money of Frank because she was hard up—and was right in thinking he owed her something. But I couldn't ignore her attempt to turn me against Frank, a good friend and the best partner any man ever had. That was what really queered me on her.

I said, "I've changed my plans some," and walked away from her.

It hurt me to give her the cold shoulder like that, but it wouldn't have been wise to go on being friendly toward her. My flesh was plenty weak where she was concerned, and I didn't dare give her a chance to get her hooks deeper into me. I left her with Frank, for him to get rid of her for both of us.

I returned the chuck wagon to its owner, then took my saddle horse and the bronc I'd kept out of the remuda into town. I paid the storekeeper, Jess Eberts, what I owed him, then bought some provisions and camp gear and a pack saddle. Fifteen minutes later, towing the spare horse under pack, I rode through town.

I saw Maria going into the hotel. She was walking slowly, with her head bowed. She turned in the doorway and watched me. I nodded, and kept on going.

Frank was waiting at the edge of town, standing beside his horse. He gave me a lopsided smile, and said wryly, "Eighteen hundred dollars. And for what?"

"You sure she's done with you now?"

"Yeah," he said, and swung to the saddle. "I told her off, along with paying her off. Let's get out of here, Casey. That money is burning a hole in my pocket, and if I stay here I'll get a thirst on. And if I start drinking, I'll get to thinking I need a woman—and first thing I know, I'll be taking her back. Let's head for the Mogollons by the shortest trail."

THE SHORTEST TRAIL was due east from Valido, and it was through rough and lonely country. There was still an hour to sundown when we started out, and Frank said, "We'll keep moving until almost dark, then make camp. That'll get me far enough away from a saloon that I'll have to put up with my thirst."

I nodded agreement.

We traveled steadily but, because our horses were in none too good shape, we held to a walk from the start. We didn't talk at all. I rode along smoking an occasional cigarette and thinking about the girl. Thinking too that I wasn't so keen now about owning the Guzman ranch. I'd been excited about the idea when I talked to Maria about it that night on the hotel steps. Then it had seemed like something to be enthused about; I'd had the hope that I could take her there as my wife.

A partner was all right, if a man was ambitious. Two men working together could get further than one working alone; that was true enough. But a partner was a poor substitute for a wife, and ambition wouldn't keep a man from being lonely. I knew that from now on, because I'd known Maria, I was going to be plenty lonely.

I had no idea what Frank was thinking about, but I did notice that he hadn't any more to say than I had. We kept moving until hazy dusk, then halted by a small creek in a lonely little valley.

As he dismounted, Frank said, "Empty country, this."

I swung down, too, and said, "Yeah."

I looked about the valley, saw nothing until I glanced in the direction we had come. I thought I saw a rider out along our back trail, but if there was one he'd dropped from sight behind a rise of ground or some brush. I guessed that my eyes had played a trick on me, because of the near-darkness.

Frank was already off-saddling his horse. I turned to my bronc and was untying the latigo when Frank stepped up behind me and lifted my gun from its holster.

I swung around, but I wasn't quick enough.

He had backed away, fast. He covered me with my own gun.

"Frank," I said, scared, "what's all this?"

He grinned at me. It was an ugly grin. It changed his face, robbed him of his ruddy good looks.

"You know, Casey," he said mockingly. "You're bright enough to figure it. I want that money belt you've got around your belly. Or maybe you're not bright enough to savvy it. If you had any brains, you'd have guessed I wasn't going to settle down on any two-bit back-country spread and die of dry rot. Not me. Not Frank Hornaday!"

He had the six-gun cocked, aimed at my belly.

"So you meant to cheat me, right from the start? Like Maria said."

"Now you *are* getting bright, Casey."

"That day in the Hatchets—?"

He laughed a little—like a crazy man, maybe. "Sure, I could have let the bull do the job for me. But I figured he might just hurt you, not kill you. Sure, I could have shot you then. But the Mexicans might have found your body and gone to the law. The killing might have been pinned on me. So I decided to string along with you, until we got to some nice lonely spot like this. Your body won't be found here, Casey. Not for months, anyway. Maybe not for years. By then I'll be in California."

"So you're going to kill me in cold blood, Frank?"

"I don't want you on my trail, partner."

"Frank, you're rotten clear through. You—"

"Save your breath, Casey," he cut in. "I'm not going to be talked out of it. I needed you to land that TCC contract, but I don't need you now. Me, I don't need anybody now. I'm—"

He heard the *clip-clop* of hoofs the same instant I did. But the sound surprised him a lot more than it did me. It merely told me that I'd been right about there being a rider on our trail. It scared Frank. He grunted with surprise, and he glanced over his shoulder. I rushed at him.

He wheeled back at me, and squeezed the trigger. I was so close that powder-flame scorched my shirt and burned my left hand. But the slug missed me by a scant inch. He had no time to shoot again, for I slammed into him. I hit him so hard that it knocked the breath out of me. He was bowled over, and I dropped down atop him. But I was in an agony of gasping, and he was able to heave me off him.

He scrambled to his feet but, instead of shooting me while I was helpless, he began running the instant he was up and ducked into a brush thicket. He was panicky. He'd lost his nerve. The approaching rider had terrified him.

I jumped up as soon as I got to breathing again. I ran toward my horse. His gun crashed again, and I heard the shriek of the slug.

I grabbed the Winchester off the saddle, dropped flat to the ground. The

brush thicket was only about thirty yards away, but it was so dense that I couldn't spot him in it. I levered a cartridge into the carbine's firing chamber, and waited with my finger on the trigger.

A voice called, "Casey? Casey, are you all right?"

It was Maria's voice.

So it was she who had been following us. I yelled, "Keep down! That crazy fool is trying to kill me!"

I stopped watching the brush thicket long enough to look for her. She had ridden up close, but was now off her horse. She stood beside the animal, about a hundred feet off to my left. I shouted, "Get down, Maria! Lie flat!"

Frank fired again, and the slug kicked dirt into my face.

I opened up with the .30-30, firing three quick shots into the thicket.

Maria came walking toward me. For one panicky moment I thought that maybe she had a gun and was going to side Frank. But then she sank to the ground by a boulder, on the side away from Frank Hornaday.

"I knew he would, Casey! I knew it!" she said. She was only about twenty feet from me now.

I kept watching for movement in the brush.

I said, "You shouldn't have come here."

"I had to, Casey," she said, her voice husky. "I was afraid he'd try something like this, and I had to warn you again. And I was too late. When I heard that first shot, I thought he'd killed you!"

There was a chance he still would kill me.

My only hope was that he would miss his next shot and I could target him by the muzzle flash of his gun. I waited with my finger on the Winchester's trigger.

Maria said, "He lied about me to you, Casey. That's why you left Valido without seeing me." There was a sound of tears in her voice. "He told you awful things about me— Casey, it's not true. He never meant anything to me. He couldn't have, because he was living with a dance-hall girl in San Mateo. I got to know him when my father had a heart attack. He came to our store and asked for a job, and we hired him.

"He disappeared after working for us a week, and he stole two thousand dollars—the only money we had. I followed him to Tucson, hoping to get the money back. But he left there the day before I arrived. I followed him to Valido, then out to the desert. He promised to give me back the two thousand dollars if I'd wait and not tell the law. And he begged me not to tell you that he'd stolen from my father. Yet he lied about me to you!"

I didn't say anything. I didn't take my eyes off the brush thicket.

Maria continued, a sort of desperation in her voice, "I didn't go to the law, because I knew that if he went to prison we'd never get our money back —and we need it so badly. Casey, do you believe me—please?"

"Sure," I said, and meant it. "Sure, I believe you, Maria."

"I love you, Casey."

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

Somehow I did know. But it didn't mean much, now that I was apt to end up a dead man the next time Frank's gun blasted. I thought of what it could mean, though, and a wild rage gripped me. I had to fight against a crazy impulse to jump up and charge the brush thicket.

Then suddenly Frank called, "Ed, listen—Casey!"

"Yeah? What do you want?"

"I'll give up, Casey. Let me ride out, and I'll give up," he said, his voice shaky. "Promise you won't kill me, and I'll throw both guns out."

I thought about it a little while. It was like turning a mad dog loose; he wouldn't be able to hurt me again, but sometime in the future he was almost certain to pull the same kind of a stunt on somebody else. He was dangerous. On the other hand, he was more apt to kill me than I to kill him if we kept shooting. And right now my life meant more to me than it ever had before, because of Maria.

I called, "All right, Frank. Throw both guns out—mine and yours!"

"You swear you won't shoot me down, Casey?"

"I swear it, damn you!"

He threw one gun out from the brush. I saw the metallic glint of it in the darkness, and heard it hit the ground. A moment later there was another thud.

Then he came from the thicket, his hands held shoulder-high. He moved into the open, walked slowly, looking scared.

I rose, kept him covered with my rifle. When he was halfway from the brush, I said, "Stand still until I take the rifle off your saddle."

"Yeah, Casey," he said thickly. "Sure."

I kept my eyes on him while moving toward where he'd dumped his saddle, but looked away when I bent to take the rifle off it. I heard Maria scream, "Casey!"

I whirled, saw that Frank had lowered his hands and was pulling something from his hip pocket. A gun. I was a little slow in bringing my carbine to bear, but Frank was a little too fast in firing at me. His hasty aim was far off, and when I squeezed the Winchester's trigger, he cried out and reeled under the impact of the slug. I fired a second time, and he was knocked over onto his back. I knew he was dead, even before I walked over to him.

He'd tricked me, and I knew how he had worked it. He'd changed his own gun from its holster to his hip pocket before offering to surrender. Then he'd thrown out the gun he'd taken from me. He'd pitched out no second gun, but a rock or a piece of dead wood. And he'd almost managed to make the trick work.

FRANK HORNADAY WAS DEAD and, since he'd been so dangerous, it was right that he had died. But I didn't feel good about it. Maria must have seen that, for she came to me.

"It had to be, Ed. He would have killed both of us. Don't brood on it." She put her arms about me.

I said, "I've got to get away from here."

"Yes, darling. What about him, though?"

"I'll tell Mitch Bell, and he can send the law out for the body."

"Yes—that will be all right."

We rode away from there, and we stopped in Valido only long enough to explain what had happened. Mitch Bell said that he would go out with a deputy sheriff. We headed toward San Mateo, which was home to Maria, and she said that we would get there by sunup if we traveled all night. We were heading in a direction away from the Mogollons and the Guzman ranch, but I didn't care. Wherever I went now would be good, for Maria would be with me.

Nothing else was important.

THE END

FREE-FOR-ALL

"OUTLAW THICKETS," Les Savage's novel which leads off this issue of ZGWM, tells a tale of the Reconstruction era in Texas, when honest men's ructions with rustlers were complicated by political turmoil stirred up by "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags." Through these strife-ridden pages strides the all-too-human figure of Emery Bandine, a man who acts from the best of motives but whose narrowness of vision blinds him to the sorry consequences of his deeds. It is a tragic story, in many ways, although finally an act of magnanimity saves Emery Bandine from utter defeat. Savage's hero learns the lesson that a good many people have learned from bitter experience—that wealth cannot of itself bring happiness.

• "Ride With the Devil," is Joseph Chadwick's second appearance in ZGWM's pages. Remember his first, that *really* different Western, "A Miracle in His Holster"? First-person narration is not easy to handle effectively in a Western, but Joe seems to have the knack!

• Omar Barker, perennial ZGWM contributor in one form or another—fiction, verse, quizzes, or what-have-you—scores another bull's-eye with "Ramshackle Ranch," a yarn that packs chuckles as well as thrills. How's about telling us what one of Omar's ZGWM pieces you've enjoyed the most? Five bucks will go to the writer of the best letter (in the editors' judgment) on this subject—and we'll wait till you've had a chance to read his "Jaybird Johnny," scheduled for our next issue.

• In months gone by, ZGWM has reprinted the bulk of 'Gene Cunningham's tales about that dangerously undangerous-looking little Ranger, Bill Ware. In this issue we bring you the first of his equally amusing fictions about another unusual sagebrush sleuth, "Bar-Nothing" Red Ames. Others will follow from time to time.

• Walker Tompkins's Paintin' Pistoleer shenanigan, "Sam's Son and Delighted," and the Kerttula-McDonald team's exposé of those who ruined the Old West, "Petticoats and Dairy Mammas," do their share in rounding out what seems to your editors an above-average issue. The future will bring

more from these authors, of course.

● Notice the headpiece illustrations for "Ride With the Devil" and "Petticoats and Dairy Mammas"? They're the work of a new ZGWM artist, Chicagoan Bill Terry. You'll be seeing more of Bill's outstanding black-and-white work in these pages.

● Somewhat belatedly, we print an interesting letter from reader La Miza Seawell King, of El Cajon, Calif., occasioned by last November's "All-Star" issue. Mr. King says:

"Long live ZGWM, one of the biggest little magazines on the market. Your stories breathe the true atmosphere of the Old West. If your authors haven't experienced it, then they have done a 'powerful' lot of research and know what they are talking about. It's good enough for me, and I've lived it from the time I could first 'fork a hoss' until my locks have turned to silver. All the stories in the November issue were splendid—good plots and well worked out; and I want to thank you especially for 'Tappan's Burro,' by Zane Grey, the greatest painter of word pictures we've ever had."

Thanks for them kind words, Mr. King (it's *easy* to send a three-dollar check for that one!)

● Controversy rages over the February novel, Clay Fisher's "War Bonnet." Some readers think it was great, some condemn it unstintingly, and some say it was good, but—! A selection of letters on it will be printed next month.

● James B. Hendryx's great yarn of the Yukon gold rush, *The Stampeders*, makes its appearance in a Dell Book pocket edition in May. If you like outdoor-action fiction at its best, this one is your meat. Get it at your newsstand.

● Next month brings "Starlight Riders," an A-1 range-war novel by L. P. Holmes; plus "Call Me Solo," a smashing new novelette by one of your favorite ZGWM authors, L. L. Foreman; and many others. See you around!

—THE EDITORS.

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Subscriptions received by May 20 start with the July issue; those received after May 20 start with the August issue.

THE STARR CARBINE, MODEL 1858

PATENTED BY E. S. STARR in 1858, the Starr breech-loading carbine was one of the most widely used cavalry weapons of the War Between the States. Made in caliber .54, the Starr used a cap and paper cartridge. The breech block was in two parts, which dropped vertically when the trigger-guard lever was pushed forward. Many of the 1858 models were altered to use metallic cartridges during the last year of the war, and in 1865 Starr patented a similar model using rim-fire cartridges. Starr is the same man who invented and made the famous Starr revolvers that played such an outstanding role during the war. The Starr carbine falling from the hands of the Yankee trooper in the illustration above has the breech open. The Union picket post pictured is suffering a devastating raid from a small detachment of Confederate cavalry stationed in the West. Notice the Colt's revolvers and the Sharps carbines in the hands of the Confederates. This was typical of the entire war—the South had few arms-making facilities of its own, and relied largely on weapons captured from the Federal forces.

RANDY STEFFEN

In this Issue:

OUTLAW THICKETS, *by Les Savage, Jr.*

A complete action novel of mavericker, rustlers, and carpetbaggers in post-Civil War Texas. Emery Bandine, giant Texan who fought well for the lost cause, combs the brush for longhorns to drive up the trail to railhead, and fights to hold what is his from attacking foes. Don Holichek, who leads a crew of hardcase riders and works hand in glove with scheming carpetbaggers, makes try after desperate try to bring Bandine's hard-won cattle kingdom down in ruins. Bandine, determined to hang on to what is his, endangers the happiness of his orphaned son and daughter and the love of beautiful Claire Nadell before the no-quarter battle over Texas beef and Texas ballots comes to its slashing end.

RIDE WITH THE DEVIL, *by Joseph Chadwick*

It's a sad day when a woman can butt in and drive a wedge between partners. As Casey sees it, she's out for money and revenge. A different rangeland novelette.

RAMSHACKLE RANCH, *by S. Omar Barker*

When you're next thing to busted, salvation's hard to resist—even if it comes in a brash, obnoxious package.

PETTICOATS AND DAIRY MAMMAS
by T. J. Kerttula and D. L. McDonald

Oh, fateful time when that first ranch missus asked for fresh milk! Yessir, the wimmen ruined the West. . . .

—and other features, including a Paintin' Pistoleer yarn and a Western classic by Eugene Cunningham.